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FEMALE GOTHIC, CHINESE AND AMERICAN STYLES:  
ZHANG AILING'S CHUANQI IN COMPARISON WITH STORIES BY  
EUDORA WELTY AND CARSON MCCULLERS

By

Zuqiong Caroline Ma

B.A., Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2003

M.A., Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2006

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of the University of Louisville

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Humanities

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

August 2010

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A Dissertation Approved on

July 22, 2010

by the following Dissertation Committee:

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Dissertation Director

## DEDICATON

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents

Ma Yunwu

and

Fan Linggui

who have made possible all the wonderful things in my life.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the completion of my dissertation, I wish to express my sincere gratitude, first and foremost, to Dr. Annette Allen. Without her unfaltering help and encouragement over the past four years, my academic growth would not have been possible. I would also like to thank members of my dissertation reading and defense committee, including Dr. Mark Blum, Dr. Catherine Fosl and Dr. Li Zeng, who were invariably supportive of and inspirational to my project.

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## ABSTRACT

### FEMALE GOTHIC, CHINESE AND AMERICAN STYLES: ZHANG AILING'S CHUANQI IN COMPARISON WITH STORIES BY EUDORA WELTY AND CARSON MCCULLERS

Zuqiong Caroline Ma

August 9, 2010

This study seeks to situate our understanding of Zhang Ailing's *Chuanqi* as part of global women's efforts to establish a voice of their own by way of hijacking patriarchal literary heritage. In order to show Zhang Ailing as a conscious weaver of female Gothic, Chinese style, my study pursues two parallel routes of argument. First, proceeding from Zhang's unique vision of human experience as an interplay of the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, my dissertation delineates her indebtedness to and rebellion against traditional Chinese "Gothic," especially the genre of *chuanqi*. To illuminate the common *raison d'être* of Zhang's modern romances in her collection *Chuanqi* and its namesake traditional genre, my study bypasses the historicity and cultural specificity of Western Gothic to put forward a definition of "Gothic" that can accommodate Chinese particularities. Second, to demonstrate the general comparability between Zhang's creative imagination and that of widely recognized female Gothicists, this dissertation engages in close textual analysis of a broad spectrum of Zhang's stories and representative works by

American writers, Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers, her contemporaries. Focusing on three leitmotifs of female Gothic—the female grotesque, confinement, and escape, my comparative approach generates differences as well as similarities between Chinese and American female Gothic. On a theoretical level, my study has broadened the horizon of female Gothic from the West to the East, demonstrating its power as a vibrant feminist literary form.



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## INTRODUCTION

Gothic, in the literary context, originally refers to a seemingly homogeneous group of novels written between the 1760s and the 1820s in England and somewhat refractively in America. They are characterized by an obsession with the terrifying, a real or imagined presence of the supernatural, archaic/primitive settings, highly stereotyped characters, and the techniques of literary suspense (Punter 1). What started as a term of clear-cut scope has accumulated a nebula of usages over the past two centuries. Many modern and contemporary literary texts only tangentially related to the “original Gothic” are stamped “Gothic” nevertheless, because they deal with the most basic human instincts of fear and anxiety and they deploy the literary devices that Gothic literature honed to perfection to induce those psychic states.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important bifurcations/variations of the genre is perhaps “female Gothic,” which generally refers to female-authored works that incorporate and reconfigure stylistic and/or thematic elements of the Gothic. It claims a prominent lineage from Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley to the Brontës and to American writers such as

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<sup>1</sup> Gothic scholars often note what seems to be the discursive imprecision the term “Gothic” has suffered in literary critical history. Two works come readily to mind that open with a discussion of the eclectic range of the literary designation: Jarlath Killeen’s *Gothic Literature 1825-1914*, 1-3, and David Punter’s *The Literature of Terror*, 2-4.

Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers.<sup>2</sup> (The last two writers will be considered at length in my dissertation.) Since Ellen Moers first proposed the differentiation of the female from the male tradition, feminist critics have tended to view female Gothic as an independent form with peculiar ideological and aesthetic imports. In fact, a significant breakthrough of Western Gothic studies in the twentieth century occurs precisely in the field of gender and genre. The concept of “female Gothic” not only marks the introduction of gendered perspective into Gothic studies, but also opens up a new space for feminist literary studies. Ellen Moers coins the term “female Gothic” in *Literary Women* to denote a powerful literary form initiated by Ann Radcliffe that turns the passive Gothic heroine into an active subject that travels, explores, makes and owns (90-140). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Claire Kahane, Julian E. Fleenor, Elaine Showalter and other feminist critics take Moers's proposition as a point of departure, recovering and reevaluating buried or marginalized texts of female Gothic, and revealing/reenacting their potential in subverting patriarchal literary tradition(s) in Europe and America.

Although these critics' works have contributed to a Western understanding of Gothic literature and comprised a main thrust of the feminist literary revolution from the 1970s onward, very few critics have turned their eyes towards the East. This dissertation seeks to take current female Gothic criticism beyond its Eurocentric (Anglo-American

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<sup>2</sup> Eudora Welty is not canonically considered a female Gothic writer, not even a Gothic writer according to herself. Nevertheless, many scholars have discussed the unmistakably Gothic elements in her work and her relation, if not allegiance, to female Gothic. Most notably, Ruth Weston, in *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty*, presents a book-length study of Welty's adoption and adaptation of both English and American Gothic traditions to explore female psychic development and imagine possibilities of female liberation. Because my definition of female Gothic qualifies everything as such that marries feminist tendencies, conscious or not, with Gothic narrative strategies, Eudora Welty will definitely be seen as a writer of female Gothic.

centric) field of vision and examine Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang 张爱玲, 1920-1995), a woman writer active in the Shanghai literary scene in the 1940s, as a conscious weaver of female Gothic tales. I suggest that Zhang refigures what I call the Chinese Gothic tradition and, in doing so, subverts its patriarchal and misogynistic orientation.<sup>3</sup> Her refashioning of the Chinese traditional Gothic, in its feminist impulse, calls for comparison with the way in which recognized Western female Gothicists such as Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers in the American South reclaimed the Gothic for the exploration and affirmation of female subjectivity and selfhood. In this study, I will illuminate how both Zhang and her American counterparts make effective use of female Gothic motifs, including the female grotesque, confinement, and escape, to question the patriarchal hegemonies of their historical times.

To study Zhang as a Chinese female Gothicist simultaneously offers a reassessment of Zhang's literary achievement as a modernist endeavor to make old traditions new and negotiates a place for Zhang in the global women's movement, of which the effort to establish a voice of their own through writing is an integral part. Furthermore, the cross-cultural comparative approach of this project extends the horizon of female Gothic as a vibrant feminist literary form from the West to the East and, in so doing, changes the face of female Gothic. As much as patriarchal "othering" of femininity and its effects on the

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<sup>3</sup> By the "Chinese Gothic tradition," I refer to the Chinese weird fiction, also called "literature of the strange," which comprises two loosely sequential subgenres—*zhiguai* and *chuanqi*—and dates back to the Six Dynasties (220-589). I will defer the detailed discussion of Chinese weird fictions, their accommodation under an extended concept of "Gothic," and their refashioning by Zhang Ailing in her stories to Chapter One.

female psyche are trans-cultural, the shapes of female “monstrosity,” forms of social oppression, and routes of escape as imagined in the stories of Zhang and her American counterparts are molded and mediated by culture-specific parameters such as aesthetics, literary conventions, and the social/historical context of literary production. By putting Zhang on the map of female Gothic literature, this study (1) challenges current theories on the Gothic to expand so as to highlight transcontinental commonalities *and* accommodate cultural differences, and (2) creates an interaction of the literary imagination across the globe, which not only enables us to identify new areas of exploration in the East but also re-news our understanding of the “old” established corpus of female Gothic in the West, namely, in this study, stories by Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers.

I have chosen female Gothic writers in the American South because I think certain historical and cultural parallels between Zhang’s China and Welty and McCullers’s American South furnish an *a priori* overall comparability in the writers’ literary imagination. Both places had been traumatized by war and a measure of colonization. Although unlike China the South in the 1940s had no war on its soil, the specter of the Civil War still haunted its imagination, and its legacy of racial violence was boiling up and over. More importantly, both locales had in place a more stringent and entrenched form of gender subordination. Although substantial progress in women’s liberation had been gained in both places by 1940, the family-community remained a powerful oppressive apparatus and a locus of real and imaginary conflicts for China and the American South.

Because Zhang's most prolific years were the 1940s, I will only concern myself with fictions written by the three writers before 1950. As a matter of fact, 1940-1950 marked a period of intense productivity for all three writers. Most of Zhang's fictional works, especially her first and only collection of stories *Chuanqi* and its expanded edition, appeared in this period.<sup>4</sup> After her move to Hong Kong and then emigration to the United States in the early 1950s, her energy was largely diverted to literary criticism and translation. Carson McCullers had a spurt of creativity in the 1940s, publishing all except one of her novels as well as writing the vast majority of her stories. She spent most of her time adapting her works to the stage and screen after 1950 and before her premature death in 1967.<sup>5</sup> Although Eudora Welty's creative career kept evolving even into the twenty-first century, her first three collections of stories and her first two novels were published in the 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

This study is inspired by David Punter's ground-breaking, albeit overlooked and

<sup>4</sup> Zhang's *Chuanqi* 传奇 was first published in 1944, consisting of ten short stories and novellas: "The Golden Cangue" 金锁记 (Jinsuoji), "Love in a Fallen City" 倾城之恋 (Qingcheng zhi lian), "Jasmine Tea" 茉莉香片 (Moli xiangpian), "Aloewood Incense: The First Brazier" 沉香屑：第一炉香 (Chenxiangxue: diyi lu xiang), "Aloewood Incense: The Second Brazier" 沉香屑：第二炉香 (Chenxiangxue: dier lu xiang), "The Gilded Tiles" 琉璃瓦 (Liuli wa), "The Heart Sutra" 心经 (Xinjing), "When We Were Young" 年轻的时候 (Nianqingde shihou), "A Withered Flower" 花凋 (Huadiao), and "Sealed Off" 封锁 (Fengsuo). The expanded edition of *Chuanqi* was published in 1946, which reprinted all of the ten stories that appeared in the first edition and added the following five stories: "Traces of Love" 留情 (Liuqing), "Great Felicity" 鸿鸾喜 (Hongyuanxi), "Red Rose, White Rose" 红玫瑰与白玫瑰 (Hongmeigui yu baimeigui), "Waiting" 等 (Deng), and "Steamed Osmanthus Flower: Ah Xiao's Unhappy Autumn" 桂花蒸：阿小悲秋. As Zhang notes in her preface to the expanded edition "A Few Words to Say to My Readers" 有几句话同读者说 (You jiju hua tong duzhe shuo), these five additions had appeared in magazines and Zhang revised them for inclusion into the 1946 edition of *Chuanqi* (460). See *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900-1949*, vol. 2, 266-267, for a list of the stories included in the first edition of *Chuanqi*. See also *Selected Works of Zhang Ailing* 张爱玲精选集 (Zhang Ailing jingxuanji), 310-313, for a chronologically ordered list of Zhang's fictional and non-fictional works.

<sup>5</sup> The novels and stories McCullers published in the 1940s include *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1941), and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). See *Carson McCullers Complete Novels*, 807-819, for a complete chronology of McCullers's life and works.

<sup>6</sup> The three collections of stories that Welty published in the 1940s are *A Curtain of Green* (1941), *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943), and *The Golden Apples* (1949). Her first novel, *The Robber Bridegroom*, was published in 1942. Her second novel, *Delta Wedding*, was serialized in *Atlantic Monthly* (Jan.-April 1946) and then came out as a book in the same year. See *Eudora Welty Complete Novels*, 995-1003, for a complete chronology of Welty's life and works.

thus to date the only, experiment with the Gothic as an analytical apparatus to probe in depth literary imagination in modern China. In 1998, ten years after offering the first historicized treatment of Gothic fiction as serious literature in his seminal work *The Literature of Terror*, Punter devoted an entire chapter of his second major publication on the Gothic, *Gothic Pathologies*, to the Gothic interpretation of a novella written in the 1980s, “King of Singers” 寻找歌王 (Xunzhao gewang), by Liu Suola, a Chinese woman musician, vocalist and writer.<sup>7</sup> The story is narrated in the first person by the female protagonist who accompanies her composer boyfriend on a quest for the title character, a fabled demigod of music. As the demigod is said to dwell in the misty and mythicized mountains of the South, the urbanites go on a pilgrimage that takes them through a malignant landscape of forests and cliffs. They are molested by leeches and maggots, misguided by spirit-like villagers (or villager-like spirits, depending on the interpretation), wounded by a revengeful tree demon, and above all haunted and propelled by a variety of grotesque/fantastic figures who are possibly incarnates of the demigod.

Punter shows an extraordinary clarity of vision in recognizing the wide range of Gothic motifs deployed in the narrative: sublimity, split personality, questioning of the boundaries of reality, delusion and dream, etc. He is also keen to the sociocultural causes behind Liu’s Gothicism, for, not unlike Western Gothic, “King of Singers” deals with the psychic pains of disorientation and alienation typically symptomatic of a fast-transitioning

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<sup>7</sup> I am following Harvard-Yenching style to cite Chinese sources—with one modification. Instead of putting English translations in parenthesis, I am putting the translations in quotation marks or italics and the *pinyin* Romanization of Chinese characters in parenthesis.

society. However, Punter fails to address Liu's own cultural heritage, despite the fact that the Chinese Gothic tradition, which predated the first vogue of Gothic in Europe (between 1750-1820) by more than a millennium, comprises a major part of the literary heritage for modern Chinese writers. Even more importantly, Punter fails to see "King of Singers" as *female* Gothic and is therefore blind to a deeper meaning of the text—a vital concern with the relationship between womanhood and art. The story, which is, ostensibly, the rememberings of the composer boyfriend B and *his* quest for artistic purity and spiritual transcendence, is actually, I contend, the narrator-female protagonist's tortured and perhaps unsuccessful (certainly inconclusive) effort to cross the culturally constructed impasse between womanhood and artistic transcendence.<sup>8</sup>

A salient specimen of female Gothic as "King of Singers" is, it cannot be the only manifestation of its kind. Liu Suola does not represent the first Chinese writer of female Gothic, nor is she the most concentrated or self-conscious for that matter. This dissertation does not attempt to locate the first female Gothic writer in history, because the identification of the starting point of Chinese female Gothic is a worthy and challenging

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<sup>8</sup> My main contention is that "King of Singers" is better read as the female protagonist's psychic journey in pursuit of selfhood. After all, the novella has no other narrator but the female protagonist. The journey she feels "obliged" to undertake out of her duty as girlfriend in the mountains is told as *her* story after she comes back to the city alone. If her boyfriend B is the *prima mobile* of the story, she is the one to bring the story back. As the sole story-teller, her authority is absolute and her subjectivity dominant to the exclusion of B's interiority. The inhospitable mountain and its demonic plants and creatures are as much her mindscape as the actual landscape. (For instance, the mountain insects annoy her so because they ridicule her over-sanitized urban womanhood.) More importantly, she is also an aspirant musician who is no less tantalized by the possibility of artistic transcendence than B. If the King of Singers is the spiritual/transcendental double of B, the King and the boyfriend can both be projections of her own longing for an art that flows like mountain air free and above the commercialization and contamination of the city. Note that "King of Singers" might as well be "Queen of Singers," because the original Chinese title does not disclose the gender of the demigod. Finally, the narrative does not end with her adventures in the mountains but literally starts (to be told) after she gets out of there. Her memory of her and B's adventures in the wilderness comes in scattered flashbacks in her (continued and solitary) journey in the city, dressed as if she was a mountaineer when the terrain she is traversing is only the paradoxically unfamiliar and boring cityscape. In this sense, B's quest is only the off-stage prelude to the female protagonist's search for selfhood.



task that demands a further dissertation. However, it *is* my scholarly project to trace the possible Chinese lineage of female Gothic back a few decades from Liu Suola in the 1980s to Zhang Ailing in the 1940s.<sup>9</sup> My study of Zhang's fiction follows Punter's pioneering effort to dissect the psychic tension of modern Chinese literature with the concept of the Gothic, but seeks to avoid the pitfalls of uprooting Chinese modern Gothic from its rich legacy and ignoring its gendered meanings. Therefore, I will address Zhang's affinities to and departures from traditional Chinese Gothic in Chapter One and devote Chapters Two through Four to a comparison of Zhang's works with those of Welty and McCullers, each dealing with a motif central to female Gothic.

Chapter One starts with an account of Zhang Ailing's personal history. It then addresses the definition of Gothic and "Gothic" forms in the Chinese literary tradition, i.e., *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*. The greatest portion of the chapter is devoted to teasing out Zhang's

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that texts of the "original" Gothic were translated and introduced into China as of 1910 as part of a deluge of imported Western thinking and civilization, and these translations inspired and informed the supernatural or uncanny elements in the work of a number of Shanghai-based writers in the 1930s and 1940s, in certain cases as much as the Chinese indigenous literature of the strange.

According to Yu Jing's study of the influence of Anglo-American Gothic fiction on modern Chinese literature, the earliest Chinese written accounts of eighteenth-century English Gothic fiction are found in histories of English literature translated from English or authored in Chinese by Chinese literary scholars between 1920-1940. In addition, between 1919-1949, a great number of Gothic novels were translated and published in Chinese, including *She* by Henry Rider Haggard (74-5). In the same article, Yu also posits that while elements of traditional *zhiguai* are incorporated into fictions written between 1930-40 by writers such as Ye Lingfeng, Xu Xuan and Shi Zhecun, it is clear that the traditional fantastic was reshaped by the deluge of Western fiction that flooded China in the Post-May Fourth era (76). Leo Ou-fan Lee in *Shanghai Modern* devotes a whole chapter to analyzing the fantastic/uncanny aspect of Shi Zhecun's stories. With evidence gained from both textual analysis and interviews with the Shanghai-based writer, Lee argues convincingly that Western Gothic fictions (including Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Strange Tales*, etc.), as well as *zhiguai* and the more popular strains of Buddhism and Daoism, provided the literary background for Shi's creative imagination (177-179). Lee also speculates that, by grafting elements of Western works of supernaturalism onto the Chinese rural and urban landscapes, Shi consciously sought "a new fictional path to the supernatural by way of some minor Western 'ghost writers'" (180). For an analysis of Shi's "The Magic Track" 魔道 (Mo dao) as a parody of Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," see Zhang Jingyuan's *Psychoanalysis in China* (113-4).

As roughly a contemporary of all the above mentioned Chinese writers, Zhang Ailing was exposed to the same fusion of indigenous and foreign fantasies. Since the influence of the Western Gothic imagination on Zhang and possible intertextuality between the works of Anglo-American Gothic writers and Zhang deserves totally another dissertation, and because I will engage mainly in parallel rather than influence study, I will not explore the scope or depth of Zhang's indebtedness to Western Gothic except mentioning the names of Gothic writers that came under Zhang's attention.

indebtedness to and departures from traditional Chinese Gothic.

Chapter Two examines the similarities and differences in the use of female grotesque between Zhang and the American writers. It starts with the definition of the grotesque and the female grotesque and then contextualizes the female grotesque against the two cultures' delineations of ideal womanhood. I suggest that Welty, McCullers and Zhang have all created transgressive grotesques, i.e., women whose transgressions of patriarchal restrictions are concretized as physical repulsiveness. However, while female ugliness in Welty and McCullers' stories is routinely embodied as extra weight and plus size, it is manifested in a range of bodily anomalies in Zhang's work, not excluding atrophy and emaciation. In addition, in Zhang's texts, not only are rule breakers appalling, conformists are equally repugnant.

Chapter Three looks at another leitmotif in female Gothic—confinement. Welty, McCullers, and Zhang all use domestic spaces to spatialize and materialize the power dynamics and psychic forces that define but also entangle and entrap women's existence. Like her American counterparts, Zhang frequently employs structures and spaces extraneous to the physical body, including houses, rooms and indoor paraphernalia. But she also makes extensive use of "small" intimate "bodily" spaces created by women's jewelry and clothing. More significantly, whereas the American writers mainly express a concern with the "cornering" of the increasingly assertive and visible manless women (women without men), Zhang, whose imagination was shaped by the socio-economic

realities of her time, treats primarily the entrapment of women in patriarchal heterosexual/marital relations.

Chapter Four goes beyond the exposition of the limiting and frequently debilitating effects of patriarchal containment and control on women's lives to explore possibilities of escape. Zhang, Welty, and McCullers all use the character of the Gothic picaresque figure, i.e., the female form of the picaresque figure, as initiated by Radcliffe to explore possibilities of women's escape from the confinement of patriarchal gender roles.<sup>10</sup> However, whereas the American writers bring their protagonists' travel to an uplifting, albeit inconclusive, ending, Zhang posits that escape is only possible in the most vulnerable moments of patriarchal society. Furthermore, in contrast to American writers' "failure" to imagine inter-gender reconciliation and understanding, Zhang materializes egalitarian heterosexual relationships in the face of the equalizing force of war, although they inevitably end as soon as (patriarchal) order is restored.

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<sup>10</sup> See Moers 122-140 for a detailed analysis of what Moers sees as "traveling heroism" in Radcliffe's fiction. The term describes the female protagonists, who, persecuted by a male villain, is pushed to traverse perilous outdoor or indoor territories and perform extraordinary feats of courage and strength.

**CHAPTER I**  
**FEMINIST REINVENTION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE “GOTHIC” IN**  
**ZHANG AILING’S CHUANQI**

Zhang was born in 1920 into an aristocratic family in Shanghai. There is no doubt she was born into a most extraordinary time and place. Nine years before, China dethroned its last emperor and instituted the first modern government in its history. Decades before this institutional entry into modernity, Chinese *wenren* 文人 (students/scholars of Confucian texts and practitioners of Confucian doctrines) had already made it a life-or-death undertaking to reinvent the nation in the image of the West, the epitome of modern economy, polity, and culture in the Chinese eye. The most representative of the rejuvenating efforts is perhaps the abolition in 1905 of the imperial examination. Lasting over 1300 years, the examination had been the major vehicle of enacting and reinforcing classical learning. Although the structure of degrees and titles was to continue as before, the path to their acquisition was now to be through new schools and new learning. The shift represents an uncritical substitution of Western for classical standards. A few years after the founding of the Republic of China (1912-1949), in the face of Japanese

encroachment on China, young intellectuals, inspired by *New Youth* 新青年 (Xinqingnian), a monthly magazine edited by the iconoclastic intellectual revolutionary Chen Duxiu, began agitating for the reform and modernization of Chinese society. As part of this new culture movement, they attacked traditional Confucian ideas and exalted Western ideas, particularly science and democracy. Their inquiry into liberalism, pragmatism, nationalism, anarchism, and socialism provided a basis from which to criticize traditional Chinese ethics, philosophy, religion, and social and political institutions. Moreover, led by Chen and the American-educated scholar Hu Shi, they proposed a new naturalistic vernacular writing style (*baihua wen*), replacing the difficult 2,000-year-old classical style (*wenyan wen*). Less than a year before Zhang's birth, the May Fourth Movement not only marked the culmination of the new culture movement but also sounded a clarion call for even more drastic transformation in face of ever mounting threats of national annihilation. Between 1919 and 1940, Western ideas were further imported, contested and assimilated on the Chinese soil.<sup>1</sup>

The conflict and clash of the East meeting the West found in Zhang's place of birth, Shanghai, and her family a concentrated expression. Shanghai was forced open to the West following the catastrophic failure of the Qing government to defend its territorial integrity in the first Opium War (1840-1842). By the 1930s, Shanghai not only became China's treaty port *par excellence*, but also the hub of Western ideological and cultural influence.

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<sup>1</sup> See Gilbert Rozman's edited volume *The Modernization of China*, 225-239, for more information on the new culture movement and the May Fourth.

Famed as Paris in the East, it presented a fascinating mixture of Chinese and Western culture. Zhang was born into a family no less hybrid. Her ancestral lineage is extraordinarily privileged. Her paternal grandfather, Zhang Peilun, was a high-ranking official in the Qing court (1644-1911); her grandmother's father, Li Hongzhang held even more prominent positions: he was one of Qing's leading statesmen and a pioneer of industrial and military modernization in Late Qing. Both of Zhang's parents received Western education in a fashion. However, while her father might represent to her the best and the worst of Chinese culture, her mother exerted on her a distinct Western influence.<sup>2</sup>

Although her father, Zhang Zhiyi, had an English name and could read Bernard Shaw, he lived a decidedly Chinese life of reading classics, taking concubines and smoking opium. The latter two apparently estranged Zhang's mother, Huang Suqiong, who left for the United Kingdom when Zhang was four.

In an autobiographical essay named "Whispers" 私语 (Si yu), Zhang describes her life with her father a "languorous, ashen, dust-laden living," and divided the world "into two halves of bright and dark, good and evil, god and the devil. Whatever belonged to my father's side was bad. . . ." (156). However much Zhang objected to his way of life as decadent and repressive, she continues in the same article to acknowledge experiencing not only material satisfaction but also literary stimulation in his house. It was in his library that she became an avid reader of Chinese literature. She read everything from canonical

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed biographical information on Zhang, see Zhou Lingfen's *Yan yi: Zhang Ailing and Chinese Literature* 艳异: 张爱玲与中国文学 (Yanyi: Zhang Ailing yu zhongguo wenxue), 93-144.

Confucian texts to local tabloids, but most notably *A Dream of Red Mansions* 红楼梦 (Hongloumeng) and *Liaozhai's Records of the Strange* 聊斋志异 (Liaozhai zhiyi).

If Zhang Zhiyi was the avatar of the Chinese tradition, good and bad, Huang was the Western influence in Zhang Ailing's early life. She went abroad a few times both before and after she had divorced with Zhang Zhiyi. Under her supervision and urging, Zhang began to learn English, Western-style painting, and the piano. She was the one who took Zhang to enroll into Saint Mary's Hall Girls' School where her formal Western education started. She urged her to make her choice between the life of domesticity and that of academic excellence. Zhang Ailing chose the latter ("From the Mouths of Babes" 童言无忌 [Tongyan wu ji] 6).

At the age of eighteen, Zhang Ailing performed a "Gothic" escape from the villainous father to search for the absent mother. After defying her stepmother, she was locked up by her father in her room nearly half a year. Deeply traumatized and weakened by the experience, she finally escaped to her mother's apartment ("Whispers" 158-161). It is interesting to note, however, that her relationship with her mother was not impeccable either. Although Zhang overwhelmingly identified with her mother, she bore towards her as much ambivalence as she did towards her father. In "From the Mouths of Babes," she writes:

Later, I left my father and went to live with my mother. At first, the act of asking my mother for money had a fascinating, intimate charm. This was because I had always loved my mother with a passion bordering on the romantic. She was a beautiful and sensitive woman, and I had had very little opportunity to be with her. . . . Through a child's eyes, she seemed a distant and mysterious figure. . . . But later, despite the straits in which she found

herself, I had to press her for money every second or third day. The torments I suffered on account of her temper and my own ingratitude little by little extinguished my love for her in a stream of petty mortifications, until nothing was left to it. (4)

Upon graduation from St May's high school, she won a scholarship to study at the University of London. When this plan to study abroad was obstructed by the outbreak of the Pacific War, she instead enrolled in the English Department at the University of Hong Kong from 1939 to 1941. Although the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong prevented her from finishing her degree, these years of education based on modern Western culture significantly broadened and deepened Zhang Ailing's knowledge and understanding of the world. Most notably perhaps she came across Western Gothic writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Brontë.<sup>3</sup>

Just as Zhang's life is marked by cultural hybridity, her work shows an ingenious eclectic deployment of Chinese and modern (Western) literary conventions, motifs, and pathos.<sup>4</sup> This was duly noted and commented upon as early as 1944 when the famous Shanghai-based translator and literary critic Fu Lei gave Zhang's work probably its first systematic review. Commending "The Golden Cangue" 金锁记 (Jinsuoji), he describes it as a *tour de force* "integration of classical and modern literature and the interweaving of

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<sup>3</sup> Zhang makes a direct reference to Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* through the narrative voice in "A Withered Flower" 花凋 (Huadiào), comparing the female protagonist in "A Withered Flower" Chuanchang's eyes, which are "brimming with affection and wisdom," with those of Emily Brontë (413; my translation). The names of Western writers frequently appear in her essays. For instance, in "Two Voices" 双声 (Shuang sheng), an essay in the form of minimally edited script of a conversation between Zhang and her closest female friend Momeng (Yanying), Zhang mentions the names of Dorothy Cameron Disney, Oscar Wilde, Aldous Huxley. From a direct reference to Edgar Allan Poe in an article that Yanying wrote and Zhang translated (qtd. in Zhou Lingfen 74), one can infer that Edgar Allan Poe is a writer that both Yanying and Zhang knew well.

<sup>4</sup> Since Chinese modernity results from conscious borrowings from the West as well as forced adaptations under Western colonial ambitions, "modern" is often used as a synonym of "Western."



classical and modern imageries” (9).<sup>5</sup> He applauds Zhang’s execution of structure, tempo and color in this particular story and notes Zhang’s use of psychoanalysis as equally adroit.<sup>6</sup> Libido drives the female protagonist Cao Qiqiao’s action and renders the tragedy of her life more profoundly and cathartically than if her ultimate enemy was external. However, Fu Lei also rigorously criticizes Zhang for what he sees as her lack of discrimination in the use of words culled from classical novels, calling them “disgustingly vulgar and hackneyed” (15). Although Fu Lei’s criticism, swayed by the ideological bias of the time, privileges the modern/Western over the Chinese/traditional, he rightly perceives Zhang’s borrowings from both Chinese and Western literature.

Later critics, no matter whether their political persuasion or aesthetic leanings led them to praise or denounce Zhang’s traditionalism, confirmed Fu Lei’s view. Furthermore, they frequently weigh the influence of tradition against that of West-informed modernity. Shui Jing, a Taiwan writer and literary critic, observes that despite Zhang’s ostensible use of narrative conventions in the tradition of classical novels (*zhanghui xiaoshuo*) including the “telling” presence of the narrator, her fictional writing has more in contrast to than in line with tradition. He suggests that the signification and techniques used in her works show an unmistakable kinship to Western literature (47). C. T. Hsia, on the contrary, believes that it is what Zhang gains from her study of Chinese fiction that defines her writing.

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<sup>5</sup> This and other quotes of Fu Lei are taken and translated from “On Zhang Ailing’s Fiction” 论张爱玲的小说 (Lun Zhang Ailing de xiaoshuo). The article first appeared in the eleventh issue of *Wanxiang* in 1944.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of the introduction and influence of psychoanalysis in modern Chinese literature, see *Psychoanalysis in China: Literary Transformations 1919-1949* by Zhang Jingyuan.

[W]hile she is deeply indebted to Freud and Western novelists for the psychological sophistication and metaphorical enrichment of her stories, she is even more of a dedicated student of traditional Chinese fiction. There is simply no other school that could enable her to make the best fictive use of her personal observations of Chinese society. Along with several stylistic devices—such as prefixing reported speeches with the simple verb *tao*—Eileen Chang gains from her study of Chinese fiction principally a mastery of dialogue and a corroboration of her insight into peculiarly Chinese behavior. The characters in *Romances* [*Chuanqi*] are solidly and in some instances frighteningly Chinese; they are therefore solidly and frighteningly real. While she is primarily concerned with the world of her contemporaries, her study of Chinese fiction has led her to stress the strong persistence of traditional sensibility even in an apparently uprooted and cosmopolitan set. Sensibility evolves slowly; old manners die hard even during a period of unprecedented technological and economic change. Each character in *Romances* [*Chuanqi*] is sharply defined against his social and economic background, against his parents, and by extension against a culture in decadence. (397)

While I suspect any effort to quantify Western versus Chinese influence on Zhang is in vain, if not beside the point, I believe to read Zhang without locating her within the lineage of Chinese literature deprives our reading experience much richness and pleasure. More importantly, I suggest that what Zhang brought into her writing from traditional literature is not limited to linguistic features, stylistic patterns, characterization, or sensibility. Despite (or rather because of) her consummate skill in creating characters “frighteningly real,” she continues a Chinese literary tradition populated by beings “unreal”—weird fictions.

In this chapter, I will situate my discussion of Chinese weird fictions under a broadened notion of “Gothic.” I suggest that the traditional Chinese genres of *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* be read as Chinese “Gothic.” Then I will proceed to tease out Zhang’s indebtedness to and departures from traditional Chinese “Gothic.” My main argument is that Zhang explores the same realm of alterity as traditional *chuanqi* tales—love and

feminine sexuality, but unlike *chuanqi*, which selectively represents the feminine “other” to please the male gaze and perpetuate patriarchal views of women, Zhang undermines the aesthetically appealing surface of traditional romances by foregrounding contradictory undercurrents of suffering, ugliness, and chaos.

### **Definition of “Gothic” and the Concept of Gothic Premonition**

“Gothic” is an elusive, multifaceted term. It is used as a literary term as well as a historical term; it denotes an architectural style and indicates a specific psychological experience. In the literary context, it is used originally to refer to a distinct form/genre of Western fantasy that rose during the eighteenth century in reaction to Augustan ideals of classical harmony, public decorum, and an increasingly scientific outlook (Jackson 95-96). Over the past two centuries, a great many texts are stamped “Gothic”—“new Gothic,” “American Gothic,” “female Gothic,” and numerous contemporary fictions of horror or otherwise—despite being only tangentially related to the “original Gothic.” The multifarious forms that accrued to the Gothic have befuddled not few critics and scholars. Many Gothic theorists carefully (or expediently) limit their studies to a particular period of the genre’s evolution.<sup>7</sup> The more ambitious, who are aiming at an overarching theory of the genre across time, usually churn out self-defeating laundry lists, sometimes book-long, of diverse motifs and plots and formal features.<sup>8</sup> The cross-cultural purpose of my study

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Ann Blaisdell Tracy’s *The Gothic Novel, 1790-1830: Plot Summaries and Index to Motifs*, which treats the “original” Gothic novel. See also *The Histories of the Gothic* series, which consists of *Gothic Literature 1764-1824*, *Gothic Literature 1825-1914*, and *American Gothic*—each addressing a phase or regional offshoot of Gothic fiction.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, William Emmet Coleman’s published dissertation *On the Discrimination of Gothicisms*.

necessitates as a first step a definition of the Gothic as a literary, cultural, and social *continuity*. Therefore I will not study the Gothic as a limited historical entity. But to circumvent the confusion its plethora of manifestations would cause, I will start by probing into what seems for many the only common denominator of the tradition: its peculiar power/aesthetics of awe, terror and dread.

Freud, in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," moves beyond an idea of aesthetics restricted to the theory of beauty to explore an aesthetics of anxiety. In his effort to discern the "nucleus" of the uncanny, Freud posits a necessary condition for its materialization. Spring-boarding from a compelling lexicographical display of "das unheimlich" (uncanny, unfamiliar) and its antonym "das Heimlich" (homely, domestic, native), he arrives at the conclusion that "un-" is an indicator of repression, and that the sense of the uncanny always results from encounters with things once familiar but estranged from the psyche through repression (148, 151). Consistent with his conviction (a familiar anthropological theory) that primitive stages of human civilization are perpetually recapitulated in modern childhood, he proposes two major categories of the uncanny. One derives from childhood complexes, the other superannuated modes of thought. Just as outgrown childhood fantasies, horrors, and desires disrupt the normality of rationalized adulthood, nightmarish myths and primitive beliefs, "surmounted" or even disowned by modern secular culture, persist into modernity (154, 155). In other words, a sense of uncanny arises when what has been "othered" (i.e., those qualities, feelings, wishes, and objects which the self/society

refuses to recognize as an integral part of itself), reappears to assert legitimacy or reality.

That the uncanny engages inevitably with the “other”—the alienated, repressed part of self/society—resonates with the etymological history of the word “Gothic.” David Punter gives a detailed review of the evolution of the word “Gothic” in *The Literature of Terror*. According to him, the original meaning of “Gothic” is “to do with the Goths,” i.e., the barbarian northern tribes who played a historically reviled part in the collapse of the Roman Empire (5). During the course of the eighteenth century, the word “Gothic” came to represent things medieval, “in fact of all things preceding about the middle of the seventeenth century,” as a result of the semantic weight shifting from geographical to historical removal/distance (5). It follows that “gothic” was perceived as in opposition to “classical.” Where the classical epitomized order, simplicity, symmetry, and restraint, the Gothic embodied chaos, ornateness, convolution and excess (6). Originally viewed in negative terms, Gothic with its stock of meanings in the medieval, the primitive, and the wild became invested with positive value in and for itself in the middle of the eighteenth century (Punter 5-6).<sup>9</sup> It seems to me, although Gothic changed face multiple times in its career, the word always denotes the “other,” whether geographical, temporal or aesthetic, condemned or venerated.

However, for Freud, “othering” does not vouch the power of terror that seems to

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<sup>9</sup> Punter explains the reversal of the evaluative meaning of the Gothic in terms of a shift in cultural values in the middle of the eighteenth century. According to him, various writers, including Bishop Hurd, began to make a case for the urgent need of Gothic qualities in the English culture: Gothic primitivism and barbarism possessed a vigor, a fire, and a grandeur that are absent from the contemporary literary scene (6-7). Punter also identifies four major areas of past literature brought back into cultural prominence under the aegis of the “revival of the Gothic”: the truly ancient British heritage, the ballads, English medieval poetry including the works of Chaucer, and the major works of Spenser and of the Elizabethans (7-8).

define the Gothic fiction more than anything else. Nor does the mere comeback of the other do so. Freud notes: "Not everything that reminds us of repressed desires, or of superannuated modes of thought belonging to the prehistory of the individual and the race, is for that reason uncanny" (152). Freud postulates that Jentsch's "intellectual uncertainty" thesis, which he rebuffed earlier, might after all be the secret ingredient that turns an insipid recipe fiery. "[A] sense of the often uncanny arises only if there is a conflict of judgment as to whether what has been surmounted and merits no further credence may not, after all, be possible in life" (156). But Jentsch's proposition reads very much like Tzvetan Todorov's theory about literary fantasies, which considers as their defining character the reader's hesitation between a supernatural and a psychological explanation of an apparently unnatural occurrence (Todorov 33). Since Todorov has the whole spectrum of fantastic literature in mind, not the Gothic alone, he does not engage with the issue of terror directly. Therefore, the uncertainty/hesitation theory does not explain the peculiar psychological effect of the Gothic, at least not without further qualifications. (Whether or to what extent Todorov has successfully explained the fantastic is also not a closed case, since his theory is not without contention.)

I maintain that the reappearance of the repressed is unnerving not because one is uncertain whether to interpret it by way of reason or supernaturalism. Rather, one experiences anxiety and fear because there is uncertainty about the consequence/effects of the return of the "other." Sometimes the "othered" reasserts itself to provide

wish-fulfillment and welcome relief from a stringent reality; it delights and benefits in the way of benevolent creatures in a fairytale. Other times it comes back bent on annihilation of the established interior and/or exterior realities, at least disrupting modern individual/society's complacency/security in discrete categories; it assumes monstrous forms and it distresses rather than diverts. Because these two kinds of reappearances intertwine and often intrude upon the real and the self in disguise of each other (e.g., in the case of Gothic as a fairytale gone wrong), anxiety becomes inevitably the base color of literature exploring the "other" and its return. Therefore it might not be far-fetched to suggest that all fictions of the reemergence of the other, Gothic works or fairy tales or ghost stories, are undergirded by what we may call a Gothic premonition, a fearful anticipation of horrendous fictional developments on the reader's part. Although Gothic scholars tend to call Gothic fictional works in which the returning other proves indeed malignant and the Gothic premonition goes into full (or over)-blown terror, my definition of the Gothic encompasses all stories about the return of the other with its attendant anticipatory anxiety, regardless of eventual consummation or dissipation of the Gothic premonition.

Although I am fully aware that Gothic fiction as it is used in the Western tradition refers to a dominantly Anglo-American lineage of stories, my understanding of the Gothic as simply a literature of the uncertain but possibly destructive and even deadly reemergence of the other bypasses the cultural specificities of the Gothic. This does not

mean cultural particularities will be ignored in the current project. On the contrary, the ultimate objective of my study is to compare *and* contrast specimens of female Gothic in two distinctive cultures. What I am suggesting here is that the kernel of the Gothic—the fearful anticipation inspired by the other—is universal, although the other addressed by Gothic literatures vary from culture to culture because constructions of the self/reality are culture-specific. It is with this understanding that I will now try to approach Chinese weird fictions.

### **Chinese Weird Fictions as Chinese Gothic**

The subject matter of Chinese weird fictions includes ghosts, fairies, animal spirits, marvels, human prodigies, and other extra-ordinary phenomena. Judith Zeitlin in her insightful study of *Liaozhai*, the culminating collection of Chinese weird fictions compiled and written by Pu Songling in the Qing dynasty, proposes to call this peculiar literary tradition literature of “the strange” (5). She chooses the word “strange” to name this thousand-year long tradition because she thinks it is the best, albeit still imperfect, English counterpart of the three Chinese characters embedded in the high watermarks of the tradition—*guai* (anomalous) as in *zhiguai* (brief accounts of anomalies), *qi* (marvelous) as in *chuanqi* (sometimes translated as “prose romance,” it literally means the spread/record/report of the extra-ordinary/mysterious), *yi* (different) as in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*.

*Zhiguai* marks the first subgenre/stage of Chinese strange tales as well as arguably



the beginning of Chinese fiction.<sup>10</sup> Starting in the Six Dynasties (220-589) as “suspect history” (i.e., concise and even laconic accounts of phenomena whose historicity and even historical plausibility came under increasing scrutiny and skepticism), *zhiguai* told purportedly true tales of marvels, monsters, ghosts, human prodigies and fantastic places (Lu 42-45). During the Tang dynasty (618-907), *zhiguai* developed into longer and more artfully narrated *chuanqi*, whose entertaining value rendered the issue of historicity incrementally irrelevant. Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai* contains works belonging to both *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*. It not only brought the classical tales of the strange to the highest level of artistry and sophistication but also came to define our notion of the genre (Zeitlin 4).

Zeitlin tries to understand the Chinese strange tales by way of Western theories of

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth J. Dewoskin argues in “The Six Dynasties *Chih-Kuai* [*Zhiguai*] and the Birth of Fiction” that the emergence of fiction as a distinctive narrative form (as opposed to history) in the Chinese context is precisely the process in which fiction and history diverge in the cultural perception from each other. He suggests that it is problematic to date the birth of fiction to a point in history since so many factors including writer’s conception, reader’s perception, internal literary features, and narrative conventions bear on generic differentiation. If the Six Dynasties *zhiguai* is to be taken as the beginning of Chinese fiction, it is only the starting point of a long process of separation of fiction from history that arguably did not officially conclude until the eleventh century when most of *zhiguai* were moved to the “fiction” list with the compilation of *The New Book of Tang* 新唐书 (*Xin tangshu*) by Ouyang Xiu (27-8, 45). However, the Six Dynasties *zhiguai* can be seen as fiction because their authors recognized them as something different from regular history and set them aside in special works or in special sections of larger historical works (39). In my opinion, Dewoskin implies but fails to explicate what makes the dating of the emergence of the Chinese fiction such a difficult task—the discrepancy between exegetical and authorial approaches to the genre of *zhiguai*. Six Dynasties *zhiguai* writers began to write self-consciously for a literary end, feeling less obliged to justify their writings as records of true historical events or models of moral conduct. However, Confucian hermeneutics which sees the primary purpose of writing as documentary (implying didactic), continued to read these writings as history. It took a long process of mutual influence for the interpretive and authorial views of *zhiguai* to bridge, in which narrative as history continued to have profound influence on Chinese fiction and writers of *zhiguai* and other weird writings continued to negotiate their role as increasingly less a *factor* and more a *fictor*. For this point, I am indebted to Dr. Li Zeng, who kindly enlightened me on the historical dissonance between the creative impulse and critical interpretation of *zhiguai*.

literary fantasy. She notes that the strange is constructed as a subjective category whereas Western notions of the fantastic are conceptualized as an objective impossibility. In other words, it was recognized early in China that strangeness is in the eye of the beholder, but the fantastic is predicated on the narrated event not conforming to the laws of the lived world of the post-Enlightenment West (i.e., scientific common sense) (6). Zeitlin explains that the fixed (unshifting) boundary between the possible and the impossible has been at the foundation of most contemporary theories of the fantastic, most notably Tzvetan Todorov's influential study. In contrast, "the boundary between the strange and the normal is never fixed but is constantly altered, blurred, erased, multiplied, or redefined" so far as Chinese weird fictions are concerned (7).

Sing-chen Francis, in her dissertation "'What Confucius Wouldn't Talk About': The Fantastic Mode of the Chinese Classical Tale," makes a more obvious effort to integrate Chinese weird fictions into the supposedly universal literary form of fantasy. Following Rosemary Jackson's revisionist work in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* that views the fantastic not as a genre (as Todorov does) but as a mode of writing, Francis describes the same corpus of Chinese tales as the "fantastic mode" of Chinese literature. Francis concurs with Zeitlin that premodern China, unlike the secularized Europe, does not draw an absolute line between the objective and the subjective (i.e., does not unequivocally deny the existence of ghosts and other supernatural beings). But Francis argues, and I agree, that the fantastic mode of Chinese writing results as a response to an epistemological paradigm

no less monological than the rational thinking of the Enlightenment. That epistemological paradigm is Confucianism (14-19). True, Francis concedes, Confucius is not an atheist or even agnostic, but Confucius regards as wisdom “to revere ghosts and spirits, but keep your distance from them. . . .” (qtd. in Francis 19). Furthermore, “[t]he strange, the violent, the chaotic, and the supernatural were what Confucius wouldn’t talk about” (qtd. in Francis 110). Given the traditional conflation of epistemological and ethical/aesthetic values, the Confucian ethical injunction against incorporating the strange into the discourse of the Confucian ideal of a good life amounts to, precisely, denying them a place in the premodern Chinese view of reality. In Francis’s words,

In the absence of a systematic epistemology regarding the question of the supernatural, a Confucian historian has to resort to ethics—the only coherent meaning-making system in the Confucian discourse—to make sense of the world. Therefore, a Confucian historian “knew of” an event so long as he could interpret meaningfully the supposed “intrinsic” moral import of it. . . . The historical writings of conservative historians . . . reflect an ethical universe where Confucian morality regulates both nature and man. Their sense of reality dictated that what transcended human ethics also transcended nature, and what was immoral or amoral became “supernatural” and “impossible.” (19)

Therefore, if something makes sense according to the hermeneutic practice informed by Confucian ethics/aesthetics, it is real; otherwise it is not. A supernatural occurrence that serves a moralizing purpose is real and normal; the flip side is that a plausible happening that defies Confucian meaning-making is strange and unreal. Admittedly the strange does not occupy the same cognitive territories as the “fantastic,” but for premodern Chinese the boundary between strange and normal, real and unreal, is not shifting as Zeitlin believes.

Although Francis makes a brilliant case for Confucian ethics to be the arbiter of

reality in the premodern Chinese view of the world, she fails to explicate the exact components of the ethical and cultural “other” in premodern China. I suggest Buddhism, Daoism, and other popular beliefs in the supernatural are the missing “fantastic” pieces of the reality/fantasy jigsaw puzzle on hand. As mentioned at the beginning of my discussion of *zhiguai*, Six Dynasties *zhiguai* marks the beginning of the Chinese fiction as writers of *zhiguai* recognized their writings were different from orthodox history, i.e., records of historical events whose truth value was accredited by the Confucian delineation of reality. These accounts did not fit Confucian historicity largely because they stemmed from the alternative realities/moralities of Daoism and Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> It is no coincidence that the flourishing of *zhiguai* happened in the Six Dynasties, the centuries of multiple centers of power and rapid succession of regional “dynasties.” Confucianism, established as the state ideology in the preceding Han dynasty, lost its authority in comparison with the increasing popularity of Daoist cosmology and the success of Buddhist missionaries in the era.

Ultimately, what Zeitlin and Francis have described as “fantastic” in the Chinese literature of the strange may very well be identified as Gothic. As a literature that deals with issues and phenomena othered by Confucian ideology, *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* stage the return of the other and predicate their affects on the uncertainty and anxiety inherent in such a return. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that the concept of Gothic premonition applies best to Chinese marvelous tales for the following inter-related reasons. First, this

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<sup>11</sup> For detailed discussion of the Daoist and Buddhist perspectives in *zhiguai*, see also Robert Ford Campany’s *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*, 321-334, 366-394, 294-321, 395-398.

Chinese tradition from Six Dynasties *zhiguai* to Tang *chuanqi* and to the culmination of the two forms in Qing presents, with few exceptions, anthologies of *assorted* tales.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Chinese equivalents of Western fantastic genres such as fairy tales, ghost stories and Gothic literature usually appear in the same collection of strange tales, as in the case of *Liaozhai*. Second, Chinese strange tales frequently employ the same formulaic openings and developments for the encounter between the ordinary human and the extraordinary other, whether the other will prove in the end beneficial or destructive to the reality the human protagonist inhabits and subscribes to. So far as it prolongs the psychic discomfort and suspense on the part of the reader, the Chinese literature of the strange owes a major part of its affect to Gothic premonition and thus can be construed as a “Gothic” tradition, Chinese style.

### Differences between *Zhiguai* and *Chuanqi*

My description of *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* so far might have led to the false impression that *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* are basically the same, the latter being merely an enhancement of

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<sup>12</sup> The eclectic nature of stories compiled into collections of strange tales may be traced back to the status of *zhiguai* as historical leftovers, i.e., anything that fails to qualify as verifiable history in Chinese historiography. As Dewoskin notes, “Bibliographers seem inclined to include in the *chih-kuai* [*zhiguai*] any narrative items that simply did not fit well elsewhere” (22). Major collections of Six Dynasties *zhiguai* include *Records of Spirits* 搜神记 (*Soushenji*, c.e. 340) by Gan Bao 干宝, *Tales of Marvels* 列异传 (*Lieyizhuan*, c.e. 220) by Zhang Hua 张华, and *Records of Strange Things* 博物志 (*Bowuzhi*, c.e. 290) ascribed to Cao Pi 曹丕. For a concise discussion about Six Dynasties *zhiguai* collections, Lu Xun’s *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, 42-65.

Sing-chen Lydia Chiang notes in her *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange tale Collections of Late Imperial China* that although some early *chuanqi* stories were written as self-contained pieces, after Dahe reign (827-35) the majority of now extant *chuanqi* narratives were written as part of a single-author collection (21). Major collections of Tang *chuanqi* include *Accounts of Mysteries and Monsters* 玄怪录 (*Xuan guai lu*) of Niu Sengru 牛僧孺, *Further Accounts of Mysteries and Monsters* 续玄怪录 (*Xu Xuanguailu*) of Li Fuyan 李复言, and *Chuanqi* of Pei Xing 裴铏. For a concise discussion about Tang *chuanqi* collections, see “Collections of Tang Dynasty Tales” in Lu Xun’s *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, 106-115.

Later strange tale collections present mixtures of *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* style stories. For a good discussion of the culmination of Chinese weird fiction collections in the Qing dynasty, see Sing-chen Lydia Chiang’s *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange tale Collections of Late Imperial China*.

the former in terms of length and artistry. True, many Tang *chuanqi* tales have antecedents in Six Dynasties *zhiguai*. However, as many scholars have convincingly argued, *chuanqi*'s many and significant departures from *zhiguai* make it better understood as a new and separate form of strange tales than an upgraded version of its generic predecessor. As Lu Xun argues in his *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, whereas Six Dynasties *zhiguai* writers generally recorded their tales as history (although the historicity of such stories was questioned), *chuanqi* writers elaborated on previously-existing weird tales or added new entries to the repertoire, knowing their role was closer to a *fiction* than a historian (80-81). It is also argued that *chuanqi* might even be seen as a genre in its own right on account of its distinctive narrative conventions, character types, recurrent motifs, and themes.<sup>13</sup> A development of great relevance to this study is what I see as *chuanqi*'s obvious effort to intercept Gothic premonition.

Certain efforts have been made in the direction of illuminating the different aesthetics on which these two sub-genres operate. Zeitlin, for instance, distinguishes *guai* and *qi* as follows:

“Guai” has the narrowest span of meanings-weird, uncanny, freakish, abnormal, unfathomable-and carries the most pejorative flavor. As the late Ming writer Feng Menglong (1574-1646) phrased it, “All in all, *guai* is not a pretty thing.” In keeping with its rather baleful connotations, *guai* designates the demonic spirit of animals, plants, and inanimate things. “Qi,” which has enjoyed the most consistent history as a term of aesthetic appraisal, covers the area of rare, original, fantastic, amazing, odd. (5-6)

That *guai* is defined as essentially anti-aesthetic and *qi* aesthetic might be puzzling in view of the common subject matter shared by *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*. But what is at stake is not

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<sup>13</sup> See “Ch’uanch’i” in *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*.

what is presented but how it is presented. *Chuanqi* turns *guai* into *qi* by incorporating the nonsensical, the violent, and the terrifying into the Confucian system of signification, morality, and aesthetics.

Francis names a number of strategies *chuanqi* employs to help its reader “make sense” of that which defies common sense.

[A] *chuanqi* writer typically presents his story in the manner of a historian, borrowing the narrative conventions of traditional historiographies, especially the format of historical biography. Realistic circumstantial details regarding time, place, and person are also added to enhance the story's plausibility. Furthermore, every fantasy world in a *chuanqi* ... generally follows a particular set of ground rules which tends to parallel that of the empirical world. . . . Most importantly, contrary to *zhiguai* stories that often seem unstructured, inconsequential, and pointless, a *chuanqi* story invariably comes to a “meaningful” conclusion—meaningful in the sense that social justice prevails, and conflicts between worldly constraints and individual desires are somehow resolved through supernatural agents. Sometimes a story alludes to other literary texts and traditions, instead of reality, as a frame (or frames) of reference to make sense of ostensibly nonsensical events. . . . In short, the supernatural, once seen as the evil, uncontrollable, nonsensical “other” in early *zhiguai* stories, is familiarized, domesticated, and “civilized” for its literati readers in *chuanqi* tales. (32)

*Chuanqi* blends the marvelous with the realistic, incorporating the unreal, unknown, nonsensical (antithetical to the monological reality demarcated by orthodox Confucianism) into the realm of “meaningfulness,” knowability and thus the reality of orthodox Confucianism. More importantly, although *chuanqi* deals with anomalies, human prodigies, wraiths, and other “not pretty things” that are the daily fare of *zhuagui*, it purports to enchant rather than repel. In short, while *zhiguai* tends to bring Gothic premonition to its logical conclusion of terror, *chuanqi* makes an obvious effort to subdue and domesticate the ugly and frightening other.

A major part of the unseemly and meaningless other that Chinese Gothic deals with and *chuanqi* tries to aestheticize is the female other and the feminine realm of love. That love and women should be proper *zhiguai* or *chuanqi* material (i.e., strange phenomena of sorts and/or things that fall outside the perimeter of everyday experience), should not be surprising. The Confucian society is, generally speaking, family-centered. Social practices are geared towards the continuation of the family line and the enhancement of its socio-economic position. As part of the calculation aimed at strengthening the family as a whole, marriage was almost always arranged by the parents, with little or no consideration given to individual preference and choice. Romantic love therefore had no place in the traditional family. In addition, with coitus for procreation only as the rule of thumb, sexuality or erotic desire occupies no more legitimate a role. Love, as an instinctual longing for the opposite sex, was early sublimated. The literati's object of devotion should be the emperor and the state, not mere women (Hsieh 199). In this context, women's familial functions as wife and mother are recognized and extolled, but their sexual power, while not necessarily perceived as "evil," was considered an obstacle to the Confucian scholar fulfilling his duties towards the family and state. Thus it is not surprising that romance and eroticism should be denied or ignored in loftier, more public realms and genres such as *shi* poetry. It follows that romance and eroticism should find a home rather fittingly in *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*, in the realm of the strange other. This, according to Hsieh, at least partly explains why Chinese love stories first arose as stories of



affairs with ghosts, fairies, and various creature spirits such as the fox (20, 24).

Although the love story began with *zhiguai*, it was only one of a plethora of exotic subject matters that *zhiguai* accommodates: strange jewels, magic rocks, natural or supernatural beings whose lives and qualities represent all the things that the *zhiguai* writer/reader—typically a Confucian scholar—is not. With *chuanqi*, however, love and women became the chief subjects, in quality if not in quantity. “A majority of the most ambitious, sophisticated, and beloved Tang tales are love stories. They formed an essential ingredient in the evolution of *chuanqi* as a genre, and it would only be the slightest of exaggerations to suggest that *chuanqi* matured and climaxed from the desire to explore these issues” (Hsieh 27).

More significantly, whereas *zhiguai* presents the female other and the strange realm of love as menacing and terrifying, *chuanqi* revels in aestheticization of the feminine and erotic imaginings. As Dewoskin notes, authors of Six Dynasties *zhiguai* were self-conscious record-keepers of contemporaneous history, even though they were not, as a rule, professional historians (38-39). These writers, even when they were believers in Buddhist and/or Daoist supernaturalism, approached accounts of marvels, monsters, and ghosts with varying degrees of suspicion (Dewoskin 41). Partly due to the imperative of factual historiography, I suggest, Six Dynasties *zhiguai* writers restricted descriptions of bizarre experiences and contacts with extra-ordinary beings to brief, even laconic, accounts. In addition, the early *zhiguai* tales more often than not present a view of the other as

menacing and destructive. Later writers of *zhiguai* tales enjoyed more freedom to imagine and elaborate, as the narrative form of *zhiguai* was increasingly recognized as fiction as opposed to history, although narrative as history continued to have profound influence on Chinese premodern fiction.<sup>14</sup> However, the view of the other as predominantly menacing and repellant persisted in these detailed, even graphic, tales of the other.

A salient example of *zhiguai* type of tales is found in “The Disembowelment” 抽腸 (Chou chang; 9:390) in *Liaozhai*. It tells of a male voyeur's uncanny experience of the female body. The unnamed protagonist sees one day when he lies down to take a nap a man and woman entering his bed chamber. Presently, the woman bares her chest, revealing a swollen stomach. The man draws out a knife and cuts her open from breasts to navel. Then he reaches into her bowels and pulls out endless intestines. Soon the intestines fill up the table and chair close by and drop on top of the voyeur. In no time, he is buried in layers of warm stinking entrails. On the verge of suffocation, he fights up frantically only to trip and falls to the floor. . . . The story seems the best fictive illustration of the archetypal *unheimlich* place according to Freud—the female body. “It often happens that neurotic men state that to them there is something uncanny about the female genitals. But what they find uncanny [‘unheimlich’] is actually the entrance to man’s old ‘home’, the place where everyone once lived” (Freud 151). “The Disembowelment” reveals that what is inside the

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<sup>14</sup> According to Dewoskin, by the end of the Six Dynasties, it became widely accepted that narrative could be written and written for literary end. In other words, it is not encumbered by the need of justification as a true historical event or the need to serve as a model of exemplary conduct. But narrative as history continues to have profound influence on Chinese fiction. Fiction clings to moralistic, even if not historical, rationale for *raison d’être*. Its rise to a new prominence as mock history restricted the fiction writer’s role as *fictor*, so far as “picking from the public record, collecting and borrowing from earlier versions, revising and adding commentaries” are the processes by which much of China’s premodern fiction came into being (51).

woman's pregnant belly is not the "home-like" womb, but endless intestines—a grotesque representation of the female sexual organs (especially, the vagina).

In contrast to the nightmarish vision of the female other projected by *zhiguai*, Tang *chuanqi* writers and their later imitators including Pu Songling, employed artful concealment and selective exhibitionism of the female other to turn grotesque femininity into erotic attraction. The traditional *chuanqi* tale was written and read by *wenren*, who began to rise in the Tang Dynasty through the newly established civil service examinations, displacing the privileges accorded to the old aristocracy. *Chuanqi* is the medium through which *wenren* express (i.e., give form and expel, according to Jackson) their longings and desires that are otherwise suppressed. Although the female other, like in *zhiguai*, assumes potentially grotesque and/or destructive forms such as ghosts and animal spirits, it generally comes to fulfill the literati protagonist's erotic longings no matter if its deadly potential is ever fully realized.

The formulaic plot of *chuanqi* goes in the following manner: first the events leading to the meeting between a promising or frustrated young scholar and the female other; gradual intimacy involving feasting, music, drinking, and the exchange of verse; retiring to the bedroom; then separation the next day or at the point when the scholar's Confucian conscience prevails, especially when he aspires to or gains office (or the beauty reveals itself as a pernicious other) (Hsieh 84). A "secularized" version of the formula substitutes a courtesan or a love-seeking maiden for the supernatural being. After the initial

intimacy and love-making, the scholar makes a promise to marry the woman. Then he typically leaves for the capital to seek office. The “promise kept” stories lead to a *tuanyuan* conclusion with reunion, domestic harmony, and illustrious offspring. The “promise broken” tales lead to the emaciation and annihilation of the courtesan or maiden, who may come back as an avenging ghost bent on destruction. No matter how the rendezvous ends, the female other, in the beginning, is invariably and lavishly portrayed as physically alluring and sensual, a creature designed to compensate the literati protagonist and readers for the denial of sexual/sensual needs by the Confucian family/state. Such impression is not generally cancelled out by the fatal endings because seldom is the dissipation and/or transformation of the heroine or the destruction of the scholar given a full-blown account. In this light, *chuanqi* functions first and foremost as a kind of erotica for the *wenren* class.

This explains why *chuanqi* accounts of human encounters with (female) ghosts/spirits/fairies usually do not inspire awe, dread, or terror. On the contrary, its basic tone is that of harmony, intimacy, and pleasure. In the foreword to his translation of mostly *chuanqi* pieces from *Liaozhai*, the German philosopher Martin Buber writes:

I was especially drawn by one characteristic of the tales, not possessed to this extent in the ghostlore of any other people—the atmosphere of intimacy and concord. In these stories spirits are loved and possessed by human beings, and human beings by spirits. But the spirits who come to woo or to take possession of mortals are not incubi and succubi surrounded by the vaguely terrifying aura of the other world, but beings of our own experience, only born into a deeper, darker plane of existence. (Buber 9)

What Buber describes as self-assuring and comforting in Chinese fantasies is achieved through, in Francis’s words, “highly evolved artistic tropes and carefully choreographed

transformations”—a process of selective representation, aestheticizing, and mythologizing the feminine other, in order for the phallic gaze to remain pleasurable and the male complacency regarding the status quo intact (81). In this light, as much as *chuanqi* romances provide the stage for the return of femininity and the feminine realm of love, they subdue the Gothic premonition of its subject matters by selective representation.

### **Zhang's Affinities with Traditional *Chuanqi***

In 1944, Zhang Ailing named her first collection of stories *Chuanqi* and claimed that “its objective is to look for ordinary humanity in legends and look for the extraordinary in the quotidian” (my translation).<sup>15</sup> By naming her novellas “chuanqi,” Zhang seemed to enunciate her intention to write about the modern experiences of 1940s Shanghai through the convergence of the realistic and the mysterious/enigmatic. As if fearing her predilection for the uncanny might be overlooked, she had printed on the cover of her 1946 expanded edition of *Chuanqi* a disturbing picture. In her own words:

The cover was designed by Yanying, with some borrowings from a Late Qing portrait of a beauty in Qing attire. The woman is languidly lining up dominos; beside her, a nurse holds a child. It is the most common domestic scene after dinner. But from outside the fence, most unexpectedly, a human figure of disproportionately large size towers like a specter. It has the contours of a modern person, peeping in as if with much curiosity and absorption. If there is anything unnerving about the picture, it is exactly the atmosphere I hope to create. (“A Few Words to Say to My Readers” 有几句话同读者说 (You jiju hua tong duzhe shuo) 460; my translation)

Nevertheless, while she has either been praised or criticized for her meticulous attention to and passion for ordinary folks and everyday life, critics have overlooked the

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<sup>15</sup> The original Chinese text is “书名叫传奇，目的是在传奇里面寻找普通人，在普通人的生活里寻找传奇” (epigraph on the cover page of the first edition of *Chuanqi*).

fantastic side of her work until rather recently. As a matter of fact, few studies have been conducted on the surreal/supernatural elements of modern Chinese fiction.<sup>16</sup> This is at least partly due to the ideological development during and after the May Fourth Movement that prized scientific thinking. May Fourth scholars staged heated debates about the existence of ghosts and spirits. Although belief in the supernatural continued to prevail among the populace, the intellectual circles increasingly banished it as superstition and viewed it as one of the causes and/or symptoms of China's stagnation. As a result, supernatural fictions dropped dramatically in quantity. The notable exceptions were, among others, Lu Xun's rewriting of ancient myths and miraculous events in *Old Stories Retold* 故事新编 (Gushi xinbian), Lin Fengmian's modern ghost tales, and Shen Congwen's preternatural world of west Hunan. Literary imagination of the supernatural tradition was further curbed with the reinforcement of the "science" paradigm in the course of the birth and growth of the Chinese communist party, whose professed atheism was later adopted as the state ideology when it founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. However, as much as supernatural tales diminished as a genre, surreal and superhuman elements persisted in modern fiction, albeit in more subtle forms and for different purposes.

With a tsunami of studies done on Zhang over the past two decades, more and more critics, in China and overseas, have started to comment on the influence of traditional

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<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of my study, I follow the widely accepted practice that considers the May Fourth as the temporal demarcation for modern Chinese vernacular fiction.

marvelous genre(s) on her work. Quite a number of critics make vague mention of Zhang's allusions to age-old tales of ghosts, spirits, and marvels. Edward Gunn observes that Zhang uses a common storyline in "old tales": an older woman sets a young girl out as bait to entice young men (201). Shui Jing comments on the similarities between Bai Liusu, the protagonist in Zhang's "Love in a Fallen City" 倾城之恋 (Qingcheng zhi lian), and prototypical *femme fatales* in Tang *chuanqi* (65).

The most detailed examination of the traditional fantastic elements in Zhang Ailing is offered by Chen Jianhua in his 2007 article called "Zhang Ailing's *Chuanqi* and the Modernity of the Fantastic Fictions" 张爱玲《传奇》与奇幻小说的现代 (Zhang Ailing *Chuanqi* yu qihuan xiaoshuo de xiandaixing). According to Chen, Zhang ingeniously weaves stock details from traditional supernatural tales into her modern *chuanqi*. One example is from "Aloewood Incense: The First Brazier" 沉香屑：第一炉香 (Chenxiangxue: diyilu xiang). The young scholar turns to take another look at the house where he met a beautiful maiden, only to see with a shudder a grave mound: a worn motif in Chinese ghost stories. Zhang throws it into Weilong's half-hallucinatory, half-epiphanic sighting of the Liang residence. "If the white Liang mansion had turned into a tomb, it wouldn't have surprised her much" ("Aloewood" 23). As Chen argues, such signature fantastic moments are scattered here and there in Zhang's fiction. Even more significantly, some of her stories can be interpreted as wholesale dramatizations of prototypical Chinese fantasies against the backdrop of modern Shanghai. "Red Rose, White Rose" 红玫瑰与白

玫瑰 (Hongmeigui yu baimeigui) follows the timeless plot of the ghost of an abandoned wife seeking revenge through reincarnations of beautiful women. “Sealed Off” 封锁 (Fengsuo) is an extraordinary modern parody of “A Story of Prefect of *Nanke*” 南柯太守传 (Nanke taishou zhuan), a Tang *chuanqi* about a man who dreamed that he became the governor of a place named “Nanke” in the kingdom of the ants (32-5).

Chen’s analysis illuminates Zhang’s indebtedness to the Chinese weird fiction tradition in terms of motifs and plots, asserting Zhang’s borrowing of well-known and well-loved elements of popular supernatural tales made her work accessible and enticing to the populace even as it intertextualizes her meanings for high-brow readers. What he does not realize, which I maintain, is that the affinity of Zhang’s *Chuanqi* collection to the traditional marvelous tales, especially its namesake genre *chuanqi*, goes far deeper than the grafting of narrative elements to reach the core of generic *raison d’être*.

As I have argued in earlier parts of the chapter, Chinese strange fiction, like the Western Gothic, addresses the “other,” i.e., that which is expelled out of the mainstream constructions of the self/reality. The traditional genre *chuanqi* provided the stage for the return of a particular kind of “other”—femininity and the feminine realm of love, which were exiled from the Confucian perimeter of “reality” in traditional China. Zhang’s modern stories and novellas share an unmistakable preoccupation with love and femininity with the traditional tales.

This might be utterly surprising in light of the scourge and suffering China was



subject to in the heat of the Second World War (Sino-Japanese War). Most of her contemporary writers were creating literature of wartime heroism and resistance. But despite her personal experience of the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in 1941 and Japanese occupation of Shanghai from 1942 through 1945, Zhang seldom dealt with war directly in her fiction. On the contrary, the most frequent criticism she received was about the disconnect of her work from the social/historical realities of wartime China (see, for instance, Wu Xiaoru 58). In response to criticisms that she evades real life issues (bloodshed, war, and social chaos), she writes in “Writing of One’s Own” that she prefers non-heroic characters because these are of “the majority that actually bear the weight of times” (17). She further states her inclination to narrate “trivial matters,” like love.

I am incapable of writing the kind of work that people usually refer to as a ‘monument to an era’ and I do not plan to try. . . . And, in fact, all I really write about are some of the trivial things that happen between men and women. There is no war and no revolution in my works . . . War and revolution, by their very nature, make more urgent demands of rationality than sensibility (18).

Thus we can arrive at the conclusion that by naming her stories “chuanqi,” Zhang simultaneously (1) designates her major field of exploration as love, and (2) suggests its marginality in the culture of 1940s China was reminiscent of *chuanqi*’s status as a vehicle of expressing something outside the perimeter of Confucian “reality” in traditional China.

The second point needs some elaboration here because it runs the risk of anachronism to assume that Zhang’s *Chuanqi* reacts to the same construction of “reality” as its traditional namesake, for the program of national rejuvenation since the 1910s was ostensibly anti-Confucian. As pointed out at the beginning of the chapter, the new culture

movement, the new vernacular movement and the May Fourth took an increasingly iconoclastic stance against the traditional Chinese ideology and way of life. It is not exaggerating to say that nationalism (arguably a mutation of Confucianism in the context of national humiliation and forced contact with the “barbarian” West), coupled with imports of Western Enlightenment rationalism, replaced the language and ideology of Confucianism *per se* as the arbitrator of “reality” in the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, the modern and patriotic standards in wartime China validated a narrow but purportedly “representative” strip of life and rejected what fell outside it as “unreal” or “irrelevant.” The life of peasants and the working class is reality, while that of the middle class bourgeoisie is not; countryside is reality, while the cities are not; The revolutionary cause is reality and the day-to-day lowly and often “shameless” survival of the *xiaoshimin* (petty urbanites) is not; nationalist heroism is reality while romantic and familial relations are not. Against *the* reality of war, heroism, and resistance, as defined by “realist” literature, Zhang’s stories about life affected by war but nevertheless going on according to the usual logic of daily gratifications and grievances, and about “buchedi” 不彻底 (equivocal) characters that qualify as neither villains nor heroes, become, indeed, “chuanqi,” a fantastic world filled with the “impossible” everyman.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Zhang continued the tradition of *chuanqi* as a genre that redeems the sensual part of human experience that

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<sup>17</sup> In “Writing of One’s Own” 自己的文章 (Zijide wenzhang), Zhang explains that in her fiction all characters except Cao Qiqiao in “the Golden Cangue” are “buchedi,” i.e., “[neither] extremely perverse [nor] extremely enlightened,” driven internally by conflicting desires and ambitions; she juxtaposes her “buchedi” characters with heroic figures that populate contemporary nationalist/revolutionary writings and explicates her view that her “buchedi” characters come closer to life: “They are not heroes, but they are of the majority who actually bear the weight of the times” (17).

society expels out of its cognitive and representative system. In naming her collection of stories *Chuanqi*, I maintain, Zhang alerts us not only to her technical borrowings from *chuanqi*, but also declares her inheritance of *chuanqi*'s resistance to cultural monologism.

### **Zhang's Departures from Traditional *Chuanqi***

We have arrived at the conclusion that Zhang's novellas are modern heirs of *chuanqi* in terms of "fantastic" subject matter and marginal generic status. But Zhang's work differs from *chuanqi* in at least two important ways. First, Zhang's stories explore exactly those areas that traditional *chuanqi* tales intentionally ignore to please the male gaze. Second, she subverts the patriarchal presumptions about women that *chuanqi* seek to perpetuate. I will use the rest of the chapter to illustrate these two points.

Zhang's modern romances draw attention to exactly the spaces and parts erased by male (traditional) *chuanqi* romances so that his world remains comfortably known. This is not to say her stories are not populated by extraordinary beauties, but the physical charm of her heroines is often contaminated, distorted, and perverted by the contradiction, despair, and abjection of their existence. The feminine other thus unveiled is ugly, repulsive, and terrifying rather than enticing and seductive. I will defer the detailed discussion of female grotesquerie to Chapter Two. Examining one untranslated story called "A Withered Flower" will illustrate my point.

The opening of the story is worth noting for its anti-*chuanqi* aesthetics. The first paragraph introduces us to Chuanchang's grave. The epitaph inscribed on the gravestone

describes *Chuanchang* as a legendary *chuanqi* character. She was “a rare beautiful girl” who “loved music, quiet, and her parents” but who died young at the age of twenty-one; yet she survives death in everybody’s memory, “a flower in memory, a rose ever-lasting . . . rest, in the depth of the hearts of those who love you. He who knows you loves you” (“Withered” 412).<sup>18</sup> However, this *chuanqi* tale is crushed within the same breath. The narrator reveals: “It was *not* the case at all. Indeed, she was pretty, she liked quiet, she died of pneumonia, and her death aroused many sighs of pity, but . . . it wasn’t the case at all” (“Withered” 412; my emphasis).

“A Withered Flower” follows loosely the *chuanqi* “promise broken” plot. Such a story typically begins with the meeting between a scholar and a beautiful maiden or courtesan. They fall in love and have a lovely time together. But the scholar leaves to sit in for the Civil Examination or report to his office. Before his departure he makes a vow to come back and marry his love. But he breaks his promise when better marriage prospects present themselves. Often, the abandoned lover falls ill in despair and dies as a result. However, her bodily emaciation is either elided or aestheticized in *chuanqi* tales. In “Huo Xiaoyu” 霍小玉, for instance, the title character pines away after she is abandoned by her scholar-lover. When she meets him the last time on her deathbed, she is described as of “lei zhi jiao zi” 羸质娇姿 (weak physique delicate beauty) (66). The tormented creature is further described as a shy maiden alternately shunning and engaging the attention of her suitor. However, in “A Withered Flower,” *Chuanchang*’s prolonged illness is not described

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<sup>18</sup> All translations from this story are mine.

in such alluring terms.

Chuanchang is one of a large brood of four daughters and three sons in the Zheng family. Like her elder sisters, she becomes a “jiehuanyuan” 结婚员 (wife prep) when she comes of age. After all her sisters are married, she is introduced to a physician named Zhang Yunfan. Zhang has just returned to Shanghai after finishing his medical degree in Vienna. Though unimpressed at first, Chuanchang falls in love in time probably for the lack of other possibilities. But she contracts pneumonia, incurable back in the 40s. Half a year she spends in bed, her body slipping away under the illness and the fear that if she does not get better soon Zhang will have to marry someone else. “She grew thinner each day, her face the look of white silk stretched taut over a skeleton, her eyes two flaming holes burnt by flickering candle drops” (“Withered” 426). Although Zhang comforts Chuanchang by the promise that he nonetheless will wait for her, he gets engaged to another girl when Chuanchang’s illness runs into its third year and becomes tuberculosis of the bones. One day, out of her despair, she thinks about ending her life. She asks a new domestic to help her downstairs. Climbing onto the back of the servant, she looks like a “gigantic spider: cold and white” (“Withered” 431). Interestingly, the death Chuanchang hopes for is one “poetic and moving” (ibid.), reminiscent probably of the way *chuanqi* heroines meet their end, desolate sometimes but always aesthetically appealing. But instead of sympathy and admiration, she finds “people everywhere eye her with terror, as if she were nothing but a monster” (ibid.). Even servants in her household are frightened by

the way she looks. When she finally comes home after a long day, two domestics come to help her in. As if she were a “plate demon” 碟仙 (diexian), they only manage to walk towards her despite themselves.

When she does die, no word is given about whether she cries with so much sadness that heaven and earth are moved to aid her in revenge as in “Huo Xiaoyu,” or upbraids those who have gone back on their word in the manner of Du Shiniang. A one-line last paragraph finishes her life: “She died three weeks later” (“Withered” 433). Whereas justice is done, and conscience, and complacency are recovered by the end of *chuanqi* tales, we leave her story with a sense of inconclusiveness and a sadness that knows no outlet.

Zhang’s portrayal of female grotesqueries aligns her with the more Gothic strain of the Chinese fantastic tradition—*zhiguai*—than to the aesthetically appealing *chuanqi*. Since femininity is one of the “not pretty things” *chuanqi* redeems, we may contend that Zhang re-uglifies, or “rebarbarizes,” femininity. But whereas *zhiguai* owes its treatment of femininity as a repulsive/terrifying other to Confucian misogyny, Zhang exposes the grotesqueries of female existence to indict patriarchy.

We have argued so far that *chuanqi* provides *wenren* with an outlet for their “criminal” erotic desires. In so doing, it also paradoxically strengthens the Confucian morality and way of life. Jackson has made famous observations about the inherent double nature of fantastic literature: it transgresses and strengthens cultural/ethical boundaries at the same time (4, 9). Her assertion finds perfect corroboration in *chuanqi*. As discussed

before, the chance for a romantic meeting going awry is ever present in traditional ghost/spirit tales. When it does, the story reads as a cautionary tale against lust. The feminine other as destructive monster dissuades the Confucian scholar from sexual indulgence and encourages sobriety and dedication to social responsibilities.

What's more important, in tales where the female other bears amorous instead of malignant intentions, the supernatural being retreats sooner or later. In many cases, the retreat is voluntary, explained by the pithy Chinese saying that "human and *guai* (non-human) take separate paths." Sometimes the male protagonist prevails over his lover to stay with him but his insistence typically spells her demise. For instance in "The Story of Miss Ren" 任氏传 (Renshi zhuan) by Shen Jiji 沈既济 (fl. Late eighth century), the fox fairy Renshi is persuaded by the hero to accompany him to his office, and on their way she is chased and killed by dogs. Even when the affairs are officiated with marriage and children, the non-human wife obtains no permanent position in the Confucian family/society (Hsie 102-104). In "Li Nun" 李麝, another Tang *chuanqi* story, the fox spirit Zheng is a competent/virtuous homemaker and gives her mate, scholar Li, a male heir. They enjoy three years of domestic harmony but Li has to report back to the capital. Coming to the city, Zheng complains of feeling sick and then suddenly runs off. Chased by Li, she runs back to the old city walls and disappears into a burrow. She is then smoked to death by the villagers and revealed to be a fox. It is significant that the romantic affair always adjourns when it is time for the scholar to leave to attend the civil examination or

report to office. The message seems clear: women in their roles as sensual, sexual creatures may have a place in a certain period of the Confucian scholar's private life, but they must retreat when the scholar is entering the public realm/phase. She must not hinder his social commitments or she risks deathly consequences. She is inevitably replaced by a proper human wife, who as we mentioned earlier performs strictly familial functions.<sup>19</sup> In creating creatures whose lure for *wenren* is unsurpassable but whose access to him is severely limited, *chuanqi* simultaneously affirms the Confucian repression of erotic desires and reinforces the cultural bias that sensuality and sexuality as a means of pleasure have no place in the Confucian wifedom. Chaste wives cannot be erotic lovers and vice versa. The former have as little to do with the Confucian family as the latter have to do with the sensual side of life. To take this argument further, it can be asserted that the dialectic splitting of femininity is the very way by which *wenren* can satisfy his libido drive and maintain his ascetic duty-bound Confucian identity.<sup>20</sup> As Francis argues, the object of desire has to assume multiple forms so that the desiring self may remain whole (141).

Zhang's *chuanqi* stories, however, undermine the polarization of women as either dutiful wives or sensuous lovers and by extension the unified-self myth of the male "subject." Her women characters cross from illegitimate sensuality to legitimate wifedom and vice versa. Such crossings sometimes molest male protagonists to such an extent that

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<sup>19</sup> If the lover is the ghost of a young woman, she can become a wife after resurrection.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that "Jiaonuo" 娇娜 in *Liaozhai* presents a peculiar case in which a fox spirit does become the permanent wife of a scholar. But even this story preserves the divide between wifedom and eroticism. It embodies the latter in another fox spirit.



they come to the brink of madness. A case in point is “Red Rose, White Rose.”

Its male protagonist, Tong Zhenbao, is a modern avatar of the Confucian scholar. Just as *wenren* is an exemplary subject in imperial China, Zhenbao is an epitome of a model citizen in modern Shanghai. Like his native city, he is an ideal product of the East and the West. Zhenbao matches *wenren*’s scholarly accomplishments in the Confucian tradition with a Western education, regarded as actually superior to traditional learning in his time. However, that he majors in engineering and earns his degree in England does not keep him from becoming as filial a son or as dedicated a friend as his culture mandates. In fact, he is impeccable viewed against the checklist of Confucian virtues: “Never had a son been more filial, more considerate, than Zhenbao was to his mother; never was a brother more thoughtful or helpful to his siblings. At work he was the most hardworking and devoted of colleagues; to his friends, the kindest, truest, and most generous of men” (“Red” 256).

Most importantly, “he was logical and thorough. . . . If he did bump into something that was less than ideal, he bounced it around in his mind for a while and—poof!—it was idealized: then everything fell into place” (“Red” 255). The ideal world Zhenbao tries to create and maintain is one in which “everything [falls] into place,” that is, everything is neatly packed and shelved in its designated category. Women, for instance, fall into two kinds: white rose and red rose. “One was a spotless wife, the other a passionate mistress” (“Red” 255). One performs the procreative duties of a wife and the filial duties of a

daughter-in-law, the other answers to his need for erotic satisfaction.

His first romantic experience is with a girl named “Rose,” the child of a Cantonese woman and an English merchant. “Her short skirt ended above her knees, and her legs were light and nimble. . . . Her hair was cut very short, shaved down to a little point at the nape of her neck. No hair to protect her neck, no sleeves to protect her arms” (“Red” 260). She is not Zhenbao’s notion of a nice girl, but his hectic life allows him little time for courting, so “naturally he like[s] girls who [are] a little more forthright” (“Red” 259). Significantly Rose’s forthrightness qualifies her as a girlfriend but disqualifies her as a wife. Zhenbao believes that his flapper-girlfriend’s body is “for the taking” and ultimately not worthy of taking. “Marrying her, then transplanting her to his hometown—that would be a big waste of time and money, not a good deal at all” (“Red” 261).

Thus making up his mind, Zhenbao rejects Rose and comes back to China alone. However, not long after he is back in Shanghai he meets Jiaorui, his friend’s flirtatious wife. They have hardly made acquaintance when Zhenbao lumps her with Rose in a flight of fantasy. “He’d just put an end to his relationship with Rose, and here she was again, in a new body, with a new soul—and another man’s wife” (“Red” 269). It is a common storyline in Tang *chuanqi* that the abandoned consort perishes but comes back to seek vengeance. Jiaorui can be readily perceived as Rose reincarnated, amplifying the qualities in Rose that simultaneously attracted and repelled Zhenbao. Another way to look at Zhanbao’s speedy identification of Jiaorui with Rose is that Rose and Jiaorui both occupy

an ambiguous status in the Confucian scheme of the world. Rose is the daughter of an English merchant and a Cantonese woman. Jiaorui is a descendant of Singaporean Chinese. In his mind, both are located in the Chinese spectrum of humanity somewhere between a civilized human and uncultured barbarian. Their identity as less Chinese and thus less human, puts them in a similar position as that proscribed for ghost/spirit lovers. Just as ghost/spirit lovers are the vessels of sexuality in traditional *chuanqi*, it is in thoughts about racial and cultural hybrids like Rose and Jiaorui that Zhenbao lets his sexual longings and fantasies run wild. While Rose's body leaps out from behind diamonds, silver laces, and "hundreds of exquisite nuisances" ("Red" 261), Jiaorui has a voluptuous figure that is every inch alive, twisting and winding like the water running from the faucet ("Red" 264). Jiaorui especially seems to possess the bewitching charms and magic that traditional *chuanqi* tales attribute to ghost/spirit lovers. Her dress is of such a vital green that it leaves the space she moves in streaked with the color. Her body emanates an energy that does not stay in the confines of clothes. "When she was in the room, the walls seemed to be covered with figures in red chalk, pictures of her half naked, on the left, on the right, everywhere" ("Red" 269). Her hair clusters on the bathroom floor and swirls about like ghostly figures in the wind ("Red" 264), which in the eyes of the enchanted Zhenbao, transforms into Jiaorui herself: "She was everywhere, tugging and pulling at him" ("Red" 264). While Zhenbao attributes her sensuality to her enigmatic identity (pure Chinese are devoid of such liveliness), he rejects her as "the kind you couldn't marry" on the same account. This

is of course reminiscent of the strict separation of sexuality from wifehood in *chuanqi*.

It is worth noting that Zhenbao's affair with Jiaorui comes to an inevitable end as romantic encounters do in *chuanqi*. After a period of sexual indulgence, Zhenbao becomes restless. He starts to wonder whether his reason is overwhelmed by his desire. After all, he wants to be "the master of his own world" ("Red" 259). With Jiaorui in his arms, he is already making plans concerning the masculine public realm: how to pay back what he owes to his mother as a filial son and how to contribute to his country as a loyal subject. This calls to mind *chuanqi* tales in which the scholar after a time "mired in wine and desire," according to an old Chinese saying, regrets his decision to stay with his supernatural paramour and makes plans to reenter the world. For Zhenbao the first step to (re)establish himself in society is to get married to, presumably, the kind of woman that he can and should marry. So Zhenbao "abandons" Jiaorui. He selects Yanli to be his wife because she is, in Zhenbao's eyes, everything opposite of Jiaorui. Although the first time they meet, Yanli is "wearing a silk shift with ruddy orange stripes on a gray background," his immediate impression is of "a vague, enveloping whiteness" ("Red" 293). "She was tall and slender, like a single straight line; the only hint of a twist or turn came at the tips of the girlish breasts and the jutting bones of her hips" ("Red" 294). From a pure and good Chinese family, she is a conscientious, albeit underachieving, student and shows promise of becoming a filial daughter-in-law. As such, not surprisingly, she does not attract Zhenbao. "Zhenbao had many complaints about Yanli. . . . Yanli didn't like exercise; even

‘the best sort of indoor exercise’ had no appeal for her. . . . [H]e didn’t feel much physical attraction. At first, she’d seemed cute. . . . Later on even this little bit of girlish beauty was gone. . . . [S]he turned into a very dull wife” (“Red” 295).

If Zhenbao is disappointed with Yanli’s lack of physical charm, he readily accepts it as a natural part of life, for he has always separated mistress from wife. Before long, Zhenbao begins to visit prostitutes. The erotic longing he has for Rose and Jiaorui is now vicariously satisfied through the prostitutes who bear physical similarities to them—“dark and a little plump” (“Red” 294). He continues to live with much zest and gusto; even whoring has been turned into a social communion, as he is joined by his friends on a regular basis. What does upset him is the fact that Yanli, in whom Zhenbao saw the makings of a good wife, proves otherwise. Zhenbao reprimands Yanli for her inadequacy in domestic duties. When Zhenbao’s mother chimes in on the criticism and ridicule that Zhenbao hurls at her, the in-laws have a falling-out and the mother-in-law leaves in a fit of anger. “Zhenbao was very disappointed in his wife: having married her for her tractability, he felt cheated. He was also unhappy with his mother—moving out like that and letting people say he wasn’t a good son. He was still busy-busy, but gradually he succumbed to fatigue. Even the smiling wrinkles of his suit looked tired” (“Red” 297).

But what deals an even heavier blow to Zhenbao’s ego is his encounter with Jiaorui ten years later on a bus. Jiaorui has remarried and has a son. She is taking her son to the dentist. The two have a conversation as follows.

“This Mr. Zhu—do you love him?”

Jiaorui nodded. When she answered, her words were interrupted by pauses. "Starting with you ... I learned ... how to love ... to really love. Love is good. Even though I have suffered, I still want to love, and so ..."

Zhenbao rolled up the square collar of her son's sailor outfit. "You're very happy," he said in a low voice.

Jiaorui laughed. "I had to forge ahead somehow. When I ran into something, well, that was it."

"What you run into is always a man," Zhenbao said with a cold smile.

Jiaorui wasn't angry. She tilted her head to one side and thought about it. "True," she said. "When I was young and pretty, I always ran into men. That probably would have happened no matter what I did, once my social life started. But now, there are other things besides men, always other things ..."

Zhenbao stared at her, unaware that his heart, at that moment, was aching with jealousy. ("Red" 298-9)

He wants to sum up his perfectly happy life in a few words. "He [knows] his face [is] calm and steady," yet in the small mirror hanging on the right of the bus driver, he sees his face begin to quiver and tears start streaming down. The crisis erupts because she has reappeared after ten years and is what Zhenbao thought she could never be: a proper wife and mother. She has found love and more. She has apparently succeeded in combining love and wifely duties in her marriage. Interestingly, Zhenbao resents especially the fact that Jiaorui has grown noticeably old, a sign of proper aging humanity which undermines Zhenbao's former conviction that she is a version of ghost/spirit lover one cannot marry.

The encounter almost wrecks Zhenbao. But the last straw comes from Yanli. Because Zhenbao thinks Yanli is utterly inadequate in all aspects of wifely art, he keeps his colleagues and friends away from her, and later himself and their seven-year old daughter as well. Thus neglected and isolated, Yanli has an affair with her tailor. The spotless, sanitary, virtuous wife Zhenbao chose becomes a licentious demon in his eyes. The night

after he detects Yali's infidelity, Zhenbao sees Yanli in the bathroom through the half-opened door. "Yanli was pulling up her pants. She was bent over, about to stand up, and her hair hung down over her face. She had already changed into her flowered white pajama top, which was bunched high up on her chest, half caught under her chin. The pajama pants lay piled around her feet, and her whole body wavered over hem like *a white silkworm*" ("Red" 307; my emphasis). After some time, when Yanli comes close up to him, Zhenbao "turn[s] *huoyan jinjing* [fiery eyes with golden pupils]," assuming momentarily the persona of Sun Wukong, the celestial Monkey King, whose *huoyan jinjing* enables him to tell demon from human. As if he sees bestiality underneath Yanli's human skin, "he turn[s] and look[s] at her with loathing" ("Red" 309).<sup>21</sup>

Jiaorui, the lascivious fox spirit lover, turns into a good wife and mother. Yanli, the good wife and mother, proves a snake. Zhenbao's world is turned upside down and he is driven to horrific insanities and suicidal urges. "Zhenbao started drinking a lot, openly consorting with women outside the house. It was not at all like before, when he retained some scruples" ("Red" 309). "He couldn't smash up the home he'd made, or his wife, or his daughter, but he could smash himself up" ("Red" 310).

It is significant that it is on the brink of insanity that Zhenbao comes to see the injustice and misery he has subjected Yanli to. After throwing a furniture-smashing tantrum that sends Yanli fleeing from their bedroom, he falls asleep and wakes up in the middle of

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<sup>21</sup> Kingsbury and Zhang (Chang) translate 他变成火眼金睛 *ta bian cheng huoyan jinjing* (85) metaphorically as "his eyes grew hard and hot" (309).

the night. "A pair of Yanli's embroidered slippers were lying in the middle of the floor at cross angles, one a bit ahead, the other a bit behind, like a ghost that was afraid to materialize, walking fearfully, pleading towards him" ("Red" 312). As known social constructs collapse and discreet categories conflate in his derangement, Zhenbao finds his world superimposed by the realm of the feminine and ghostly other. In this double-conscious state, he is able to see the degrading and effacing effect his tyranny has wrought on his wife. After this moment of sympathetic understanding, he goes back to "being a good man" ("Red" 312). The ending wryly echoes the beginning of the story, in which Zhenbao is described as "the ideal modern Chinese man," whose compartmentalized psyche demands that "everything [fall] into place" (255). Although the ending makes it clear that Zhenbao does not, after all, transcend his view of the world as consisting of inviolable binaries, it also seems to suggest that Zhenbao owes his second-time goodness to a much more sophisticated understanding of women and love.

I have tried to contextualize our understanding of Zhang's *Chuanqi* in the Chinese tradition of strange literature. As a literature that deals with issues and phenomena othered by Confucian ideology, it has an inherent Gothic premonition. Both *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* include stories that bring the Gothic premonition into full play, but quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, *chuanqi* tends to intercept the potential terror of cultural alterities for moralistic and/or aesthetic ends. Zhang identifies her urban romances with traditional *chuanqi* tales for their shared subject matter and marginal generic status. Other than this,



Zhang's "chuanqi" is as different from the traditional stories about love and femininity as night from day. Zhang "returns" the eroticized portrayal of the feminine other to terrifying revelations frequently found in *zhiguai*. Furthermore, she undermines the patriarchal view of the world in general and its polarization of women in particular by creating women characters that confound stereotypes.

In contrast to the prevalent misogyny of classical tales, Zhang explores the power of the "other" not to extort conformity or enhance allegiance to a culture that alienates the female and the feminine realm of love. Nor does she engage in selective representation or myth-making so that excursions to the feminine alterity turn into joyful, sensual carousals for privileged male members of the society. Rather, she appropriates motifs and techniques of *chuanqi* and *zhiguai*, amalgamates them as she sees fit, and makes visible the hidden, to reveal the sores and pus behind the ornate appearance. Thus she overthrows the male-centric visioning and forces the male gaze to confront its self-imposed blindness.

It is in the creative rebellion of Zhang's *Chuanqi* against *chuanqi* and other Chinese "Gothic" genres that, I argue, Zhang's fiction demands a comparison with Western female Gothic writings. Just as Western female Gothic is a feminist re-creation of traditional Gothic, Zhang's *Chuanqi* refashions the traditional weird fictions to indict patriarchal views and practices. I will demonstrate in the following chapters the extensive comparability between her and the American female Gothic Writers Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers in their use of female Gothic motifs such as the female grotesque,

confinement, and escape.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Wolfgang Kayser attempts to give a more precise definition of the grotesque based on the etymological history of the word. *La grottesca* and *grottesco*, deriving from *grotta* (cave), were first used in Italy in the late fifteenth century to characterize a “hitherto unknown ancient form of ornamental painting” found in excavations of the ruins of Nero’s Palace (19). The most typical feature of this peculiar style is the monstrous fusion of human and nonhuman elements. The early uses of the word suggest to Kayser a generalization: it indicates “not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one—a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid” (21). The recurrent motifs of the grotesque include monsters, the jungle, mechanized human beings, and insane people (181-184). Such motifs suggest that the grotesque is always concerned with a world in which traditional distinctions are eliminated and lead to one of Kayser’s definitions of the

grotesque: “THE GROTESQUE IS THE ES-TRANGED WORLD” (184; original capitalization). In other words, the grotesque refers to a world of violence and fear, alienation and despair, in which the familiar turns frightening (reminiscent of Freud’s *unheimlich*).

All in all, Kayser’s discussion of the grotesque renders it very much another word for Gothic, both conveying a world in which traditional distinctions are eliminated and a style that simultaneously invokes and subdues the deviant and demonic. In contrast, later theorists interpret the grotesque as part—rather than the whole—of the Gothic world, more specifically, its population of unsightly bodies. Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, characterizes the grotesque as bodily contortion. In Bakhtin’s account, the body is a body of excess epitomized by the “senile pregnant hag,” and so it queries borders and categories (25). Alan Spiegel likewise emphasizes embodiment in his theorization of southern grotesque, but he extends the grotesque to include mental contortions and deviations. “The grotesque, as it appears in Southern fiction, refers neither to the particular quality of a story . . . nor to its mood . . . nor to its mode of expression. . . . The grotesque refers rather to a type of character” identifiable by either physical or mental deformities/anomalies (428). For the purpose of my research, I will stretch the scope of the grotesque even further to refer to characters whose body/thinking and/or behavior deviate from culturally-sanctioned standards of normality. I will also look at the grotesque from a gendered point of view, zooming in on characters that we may call the female grotesque.

Many feminist theorists have pointed out that femininity is historically and

culturally constructed as deformed masculinity (see, for instance, Gilbert and Guber 53, 244, 657n12, 673n33). While the male body represents the whole(some) norm, the female is the freak without a penis. As the grotesque other of masculinity, femininity has to be recuperated/rehabilitated from itself to become part of normalcy. Hence (1) the plethora of male-centric proscriptions woman needs to meet to be decent and (2) painstaking hours spent before the mirror so as not to be ugly. If we borrow Bakhtin's terminology, the female body thus reformed is the classical body, closed, static, coherent, and beautiful to the male gaze. It follows that the female grotesque is either (1) what can be called the transgressive type, i.e., that which blatantly disregards patriarchal delineation or (2) what may be dubbed the defective type, i.e., that which submits to re-formation but fails to "come out right"—a "defective product" as it were. Whichever route it takes, it is an "unheimlich" existence that jeopardizes patriarchal norms: ugly, repugnant, and frightening.

In this chapter, I will contextualize the above theoretical understanding of the female grotesque in the historical and cultural milieux of Zhang's China and Welty and McCullers's American South. Since the grotesque is, by virtue of opposition, inevitably defined by the classical body, I will first spend some time comparing the two culture's views on womanhood. While there are admittedly basic similarities in the ways patriarchies delineate gender roles and conceptualize the ideal woman, it is not surprising that, given their distinct historical and cultural heritages, the American South and China should also diverge in imagining specific "looks" of female beauty and virtue. It follows

that ugliness in Zhang is not exactly of the same shape or “color” as we see in Welty and McCullers. It is my main contention that the grotesque women as penned by Welty and McCullers are characterized by a simultaneous “overflowing” of ideological and physical limits. Zhang’s transgressive grotesques, on the other hand, are as a rule not largesses. Rather, they are frightening because of their association with malignant supernatural beings and/or the shrew. In addition, although all three writers create memorable transgressive grotesques, only Zhang taps in full the subversive value of the defective type. In my textual analysis, I will first look at the grotesques of “excess” as imagined by all three writers. Then I will give examples of Zhang’s “inadequate” grotesques.

### **Ideal Womanhoods in the American South and China**

As early as the seventeenth century, southern settlers brought with them patriarchal values from England and applied them to the new world. According to Barbara Welter, by the nineteenth century, the American feminine ideal was the true woman, who epitomized the following four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (21). Her religiosity compensates man’s irreligion in their chase of the dollar. As the source of moral inspiration and virtuous influence, she is another, better Eve, working in cooperation with the redeemer to bring the world from “sin and revolt” (22-23). Her purity (virginity) is to be guarded even at the cost of life. Without it, she is no woman at all, but a member of a lower order. In the nineteenth century women’s magazines, the loss of virginity outside wedlock is most certainly followed by derangement and death (23-25). The ideal woman submits to her husband as the divine hierarchy decrees (thus preserving the God-ordained

order). She does not feel or act for herself, only passively responds. Her place is unquestionably at home—as daughter, sister, and most importantly wife and mother (26-31, 37, 38).

In Chinese society female subjugation was justified in metaphysical thought, codified by rules of propriety, and supported by laws and social convention. According to Gu Hongming, the ideal womanhood is summed up in three “live for’s” (also known as three obediences) and four virtues. The three obediences stipulate that a Chinese woman never lives for herself, but for the men in her life: for her father as a maiden, for her husband as wife, and finally for her son as mother. The first three virtues address the feminine character, conversation, and appearance respectively, prescribing meticulous propriety in women’s speech, dress, and demeanor. Taken to the extreme, the propriety tenet demands the self-seclusion of the female gender, which was practiced with much contention throughout China’s premodern history. The fourth virtue concerns the legitimate realms of women’s labor, naming domestic services, specifically work at the loom and in the kitchen, as women’s rightful occupation. This no doubt reinforces the idea that a good woman does not step beyond the inner quarters (75-76).

It is not difficult to see the parallels between the two models of ideal femininity, albeit difference in the rigidity of the rules exists. Both prescribe the division of inner and outer spheres. Home is the proper sphere of women’s labor, housekeeping her rightful calling. As a result, women’s education in both cultures was geared towards shaping the proper temperament and skills for domestic services. Both also call for a feminine

existence devoid of the self. She is defined according to her relationship to the male members of the family, her wishes and actions a mere reflection or result of their wishes and actions. As a corollary of her dependence, she is submissive and passive, exhibiting no sexual or intellectual drive of her own. Ironically, her much cloistered and derivative existence is allegedly the cornerstone of not only familial and social but also cosmological order. Although the underlying reasonings differ (correlative micro and macro cosmos for China and divine order for America), both cultures believe that women's performance of their subordinate role sustains the order of the universe.

These ideals of womanhood were challenged and refuted over time, especially with the onset of modernity.<sup>1</sup> Contending demarcations of the beginning of modernity in China and the American South abound.<sup>2</sup> For my purpose, I will use two epoch-changing wars in China and America as the starting point of modernity: the first Opium War (1840-1842) for Modern China and the Civil War (1861-1865) for the Modern (New) South.

The Civil War ends with the defeat of the South, the abolition of racial slavery,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Elisabeth Croll's *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-perception in Twentieth-century China*, and *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* edited by Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson for changing ideals of womanhood in China. The latest book-length publications on modernity and womanhood in the American South include *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* by Jane Turner Censer and *Entitled to the Pedestal: Place, Race, and Progress in White Southern Women's Writing, 1920-1945* by Nghana tamu Lewis.

<sup>2</sup> The May Fourth Movement is generally agreed to be the cultural watershed between the old and the modern China(s). But its importance as the pivotal process in the twentieth century Chinese modernization has been challenged and debated by recent publications. David Der-wei Wang's *Fin-de-Siecle Splendor*, Lydia Liu's *Translingual Practice*, Leo Ou-fan Lee's *Shanghai Modern*, and Yeh Wen-hsin's edited volume *Becoming Chinese* represent efforts to decenter the May Fourth. The demarcation between the old and the new South(s) is an equally divisive issue among historians of the American South. Vann C. Woodward in his seminal work on postbellum Southern history, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, sees the germination of Southern modernity in the Civil War and the Reconstruction. But some historians take the position that the southern dreams of material modernization in the form of industrialization and urbanization didn't really take off until after the First World War. George Brown Tindall, for one, picked up exactly where Woodward left off in his survey of the New South: the emergence of his New South starts in 1913.



and, on top of all, the promise of a New South with modern socioeconomic relations, as well as other facets of modernity such as industrialization and urbanization. Southern (white) women assumed the role of the head of the family during and after the Civil War due to the absence or emasculation of their men. Many ran the plantation and engaged in local politics. A great many more took advantage of the new opportunities created by the industrializing New South to achieve economic independence. Their demands for influence outside the domestic sphere took concrete forms in a variety of political activism in the postbellum era. Most notably, a small number of them joined their northern sisters in the women's suffrage movement, persevering against persistent indifference and hostility. After winning the vote in 1920, they pursued a wide range of social reforms in the progressive era, including abolishing child labor, improving women's education and working conditions, and uplifting the black race (Scott 185-212). Speaking of the waning influence of the old ideals of femininity, Anne Firor Scott claims that women coming of age in the 1920s, grew up in an urban home instead of a rural plantation household, and had before them many options other than domesticity. They might still be brought up to be ladies but would grow up to see its anachronism. They might maintain the outward ladylike behavior, but few would buy into it as a complete prescription for their lives. Instead they had role models in the businesswomen, political activists, teachers, social workers, librarians, newspaperwomen, lawyers, and doctors, all of whom were in newspapers articles, if not seen in the neighborhood (221-225). This can be only truer for the generation of women coming of age in between the late 1920s and mid-1930s,

including Welty and McCullers. In the postbellum South, political/public engagement, industrialization, and urbanization engendered unprecedented education and employment opportunities.

If the Civil War toppled the economic and social structure of the Old South, the First Opium War jerked the proud Empire of China out of its millennia-long dream of unchallengeable superiority. It began a century of foreign invasions, unequal treaties and civil strife that forced the Chinese to question the validity of their fundamental beliefs. Ever-pronounced Western economic, political, and religious influence in China stimulated comparison between old (indigenous) institutions and practices on the one hand and modern (Western) ones on the other. Waves of efforts, aimed at national rejuvenation and often advocated by western-educated men and tacitly or explicitly supported by “enlightened” officials, swept across China. Visions of a new China gradually surfaced that to varying degrees sought national ascendancy through modernization/westernization. It is fair to say that the Opium War set China on the road (1) to replace the autocracy of the imperial court anchored in Confucian hierarchy with the modern polity of the republic based on mass political participation, (2) to remake its economy and military with science and technology, and (3) to reconfigure social relations with reference to western customs and practices.

Against this backdrop, a women’s movement informed by both an indigenous tradition of protesting patriarchal oppression and the newly imported Western feminism took shape and gathered momentum. In the late nineteenth century, advocates of women’s

rights built their activism around natural foot, equal rights to education, and women's role in saving the country from the aggression of foreign powers.<sup>3</sup> The same period marked the incipient stage of the women's suffrage movement (Yao 113-124). After the revolution in 1911, the government of the Republic of China guaranteed equality to everyone, including women (Yao 135). After the May Fourth Movement, women's struggle for political, economic, and educational rights not only intensified but also reached female laborers (Yao 127-129). Women's increasing demand for a more self-centered and heterosocial lifestyle coupled with the contingencies of war against "feudalistic" warlords and foreign invaders opened many doors for them in education and economic, political, and even military actions.

However, despite the apparent broadening scope of life for women in both the American South and China from the mid- or late nineteenth century to the 1940s, the influence of the old stereotype or mystique of women as domestic and dependent creatures persisted. There remained remarkable social pressure for women to live up to the old ideals, and family continued to operate as a site for gender oppression in both cultures. More significantly, old gender principles were given new life through imbrication with the "nationalist" agenda of each culture.

The defeat of the South in the Civil War fired rather than weakened what we might call "southern nationalism." Confederate loyalists and sympathizers perpetuated allegiance

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<sup>3</sup> Foot-binding was a custom practiced on young girls and women for approximately one thousand years in China, beginning in the tenth century and ending in the early twentieth century. Foot-binding resulted in lifelong disabilities for most of its victims. Advocacy for unbound (natural) feet was a major part of fin de siècle gender reform in China.

to the Confederate ideology, if not the failed Southern nationhood, well beyond its life span. Most being stakeholders in the Old South plantation economy, they now transformed themselves into a new breed of Southern industrialists and capitalists. Their industrial dream for the South (to beat the Yankees at their own game) results at least partly from the revengeful will to restore the respectability—or rather superiority—of the Southerner. But there is one catch to this plan of final vindication: the South needed to be careful not to transform itself so much that it risks losing its “Southernness.” Much of the South had already changed beyond recovery. It lost the war over the “peculiar institution” of the South. To restore slavery would be jeered as an anachronism. It would also be at odds with the industrial drive of the New South, since the freed black race had made up most of the cheap “docile” wage labor advertised as a major attraction for northern capital. Many other things had to be sacrificed for economic gains. The picturesque farms and prairies had to be replaced by railroads and factories. Wooded hillsides and mountaintops were to be blasted for mining. In the much changed natural and economic landscape of the South, what (white male) southerners considered the defensible parts of Southernness—the structure of its society, its manners and traditions which made the South “as different from the North as Ireland does, or Hungary, or Turkey” (Woodward 142)—would have to be guarded with double tenacity.

In this context, the old ideals of femininity, long perceived as the foundation of Southern social order, became the centerpiece to show the unchanging Southernness in the *new/northernized* South. The Confederate woman and the New Belle are the names of the

new embodiments of Southern ladyhood. Referred to as the steel magnolia, the Confederate Woman was a valiant defender of the Confederacy, the intransigent monument-builder of the Lost Cause, and the high-minded standard bearer of Southern aristocracy, patriarchy, and nobility (Roberts 7). Despite the fact that she was “forced” into roles of responsibility during and after the Civil War and presented with a broader scope of political/social engagement, she proclaimed the hearth her proper place and ostensibly despised the world-seeking New Woman in the postbellum South. During and after the suffrage movement, she acted a staunch anti-suffragist, although paradoxically she did not hesitate to break beyond the confines of home to agitate opposition to the woman’s vote.<sup>4</sup> Activities of the United Daughters of the Confederacy took women outside the home, bringing them in closer touch with contemporary politics. But it purportedly honored a heritage defined by gender and racial subordination.

At the same time, the Southern Belle, heiress of the Confederate Woman, was the walking symbol of the South’s integrity and glamour. Her passivity, receptivity, and statue-like immovability perpetuated the oppositions between masculinity and femininity. Since her sexual purity translated into racial purity, white supremacy resided in her (Robert 102-4). It follows that the New Belle is not only a marker of Southern patriarchy but also an expedient means to preserve discriminatory racial constructs up to arguably the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Portrayed as the avatar of sexual purity and weakness, she

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<sup>4</sup> Elna C. Green devotes half of her book on the women’s suffrage movement in the American South, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question*, to delineating the origin, ideological foundation, organizational strategies and activities of the Southern *antisuffrage* movement. See, in particular, chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6 of her book.

lies at the core of the “black rapist” rhetoric that white men used to terrorize black communities and assault their socio-economic upward mobility (Cash 17, 108, 117-8, 125, 116-7; Hall 141-9; Bederman 29-30). Tied up closely in this manner with Southern white interest, the ideals of Southern femininity are renewed as an emblem and a vehicle of Southern Identity. As Anne Goodwyn Jones states in *Tomorrow is Another Day*: “[T]he southern lady is at the core of a region’s self-definition; the identity of the South is contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady” (4).

Just as old values of Southern womanhood persisted in changed forms in the New South, traditional ideals of Chinese femininity were given a new life in modern China. As historians have shown in many different ways, the women’s movement in China was from the very beginning co-opted by the larger campaign of national salvation. Early modern intellectuals, represented by Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Tan Sitong, posit women as symbolic of China’s subordination and consider gender equality a prerequisite for China to engage the world as an equal. Liang Qichao, for instance, postulates that “women’s learning lies in fact at the root of the existence and strength of the state” (40). As Wendy Larson generalizes, “Female and male reformists circumscribed their demands for women’s education, participation in government and social affairs, and the abolition of (the long-revered and highly-textualized) Confucian notions of chastity and female martyrdom (passed on and developed from Han through Song Confucianism and right up to the present) within the context of the healthy nation” (30). As a corollary of the above-stated homology of women’s improvement and national strengthening, women were encouraged

not only to build their physical health and intellectual power, but also to contribute directly to the nationalist drive for independence and modernization.

In her intriguing study of the referential shift from the kin-inflected category *funü* to generic terms for all women such as *nüren* (literally, female person), Tani Barlow shrewdly points out that the creation of these neologisms reflects and contributes to a new paradigm of gendered behavior (50). Examining a 1907 collection of stories about Chinese and Western virtuous women called *New Study Book for Women* 女子新读本 (*Nüzi xin duben*), she observes that while Book 1 retells familiar Chinese stories of filial daughters, just mothers, and other situated kinswomen, Book 2 offers tales of heroic women who do not just contribute to the nation through service to husbands and in-laws but serve the nation directly. Together, she concludes, they show “female heroes shifting their loyalties from husband or father to nation, without directly requiring that they abandon the prior object” (Barlow 50-52). Jone Judge likewise observes that women’s service is no longer tied exclusively to the marital family. The end point of service is shifted from the marital family to the nation, with or without the mediation of the marital family. Many people even called for service directly to the nation that was not only unmediated by familial obligations but also unfettered by gender norms (Judge 31).

Obviously though, gender norms are thrown to the wind only so far as the rebellious act is justified by the nationalist cause. The flip side is that to the extent the “new” women’s political position was integrated into the mainstream (male) drive for modernity, it became a micropolitics subsumed under the overarching macropolitics of

nationalism(s). As a result, women's emancipation in itself was forever "postponed" by the more important and urgent needs of the nation as a whole. Also, while the convention of female seclusion and domesticity is severely breached by the call for her to serve the nation, her identity is even more tied to and dependent on the collectivity surrounding her. It is not too far-fetched to say that the old regime of selfless service was reinforced rather than weakened in late Qing and early Republic, in that it expanded from three "live-for's" to four now that the nation needed to be served too and that the fourth live-for was frequently predicated upon the old trio. In Judge's words, "While nationalism created new conditions of possibility that many women willingly embraced, those conditions were limited within well-defined national rubrics. In contrast, adherence to rigid Confucian principles could earn them the moral capital necessary to constitute themselves as individual historical subjects" (5).

From the discussion above, we can conclude that from the mid- or late nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century, old ideals of femininity continued to exert considerable influence on women's lives in both China and the American South. The Southern ladyhood is reborn in the confederate woman and the New Belle under the aegis of Southern "nationalism." Likewise, traditional womanhood was reinvented to accommodate the emergence of nationalist consciousness. Although the tenet of domesticity is irreversibly breached by women's participation in social and political processes, willing or "involuntary," the function of womanhood as a repository of social values only became more entrenched. Entering into a metonymic relation with the confederacy (i.e., the white



supremacist ideology it represents if not the bygone political entity *per se*) in the American South or New China in China, women in the period under study won no more room for the creation of an independent self than their predecessors. In both cases, the no-self pillar of the old feminine ideals was reinforced, albeit at varying expense of the principle of domesticity.

### **Welty, McCullers, and Zhang's Transgressive Grotesques**

Having argued that the ideal woman for both the American and Chinese contexts is the selfless passive custodian of familial and more recently "nationalist" significance, I suggest that the female grotesque is none other than the self-seeking and self-ish, the one who resists familial, communal, and "nationalist" definition, subjugation, and exploitation of her selfhood and who asserts herself as a "scandalously" active, independent, and desiring subject. Welty, McCullers, and Zhang have all created such transgressive heroines in their works and as a rule they are appalling sights. Lily Daw in Welty's "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," a dim-wit who runs around in petticoats, shocks the three ladies—the self-righteous moral guardians of the town—with her undisguised sexuality and unashamed desire. Mick and Frankie, in McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* respectively, are lanky teenage girls whose headstrong androgyny troubles their communities' sense of gender and, by extension, racial distinctions. Rudy Fisher in Welty's "A Piece of News" is a cat-like woman of demonic sexual energy who goes off for trysts with strangers from out of town. Miss Amelia in "Ballad of the Sad Café" is a well-muscled virago who fights, works, and drinks like a man.

Qiqiao in Zhang's "The Golden Cangue" perverts all the tenets of Confucian wifedom and motherhood with her ghostly features. Liusu in "Love in a Fallen City" reaps her personal fulfillment in a national disaster.

Although both cultures conceptualize self-seeking/self-ish women as uncongenial/uncanny bodies, it is important to point out that major differences exist between the dominant ways in which internal incongruence with patriarchal delineation is externalized in visual forms. I suggest that while deviance from patriarchal norms is manifested within a spectrum of bodily ugliness and creepiness in Zhang's work, gender transgression in Welty and McCullers' stories is routinely "embodied" as extra weight and plus size. Bakhtin argues that the grotesque body is a body of excess, overflowing the strictures of limits. This applies literally and metaphorically to a large number of grotesque figures created by Welty and McCullers: they are often of gigantic proportions, and they inundate and appall the community they live in by virtue of their "hideous" flouting and crossing of gender boundaries (e.g., Miss Eckhart in *The Golden Apples*, the gargantuan woman in "A Memory," and Miss Amelia in "The Ballad of the Sad Café," all of which will be given detailed analysis later in the chapter). But the offenders of gender decorum in Zhang's stories, such as Liusu and Qiqiao as mentioned above, almost never have colossal, overpowering bodies. Instead they are petite and delicate figures who nevertheless possess an eerie quality that flashes up in moments of psychological tension.

I maintain that the absence of synchronic exterior and interior body "overflowing" in Chinese characters—or rather the presence of it in the American counterparts—is, in the

final analysis, caused by the fact that gender is not racially inflected in China whereas it is in the American South. Readily accessible physiological differences between blacks and whites give rise to tighter association of the body surface to socioeconomic standing in the collective mind of the South. The close-knit relationship between body and status is most saliently expressed by the images of black and white women. Against the physicality of stereotypical black women—the black mammy with enormous breasts and hips and the black seductress with demonic sexual energy—white womanhood is locked into the incorporeal and asexual miniature stature. Thus the body of the American grotesque is implicitly an uncanny hybrid of racial features, a monster in the peculiar Southern nightmare of race-mixing and miscegenation. In comparison, Chinese characters enjoy more fluidity in their bodily construction, as their ugliness/creepiness is not restricted to physical “overflowing.”

In addition, whereas masculine physical traits (partially embedded in enormity but expressed in musculature, body hair, and other masculine characteristics) are salient manifestations of female abnormality in the American stories, they are totally missing from Zhang’s female grotesques. The reasons behind Zhang’s “failure” to utilize a major category of transgressive body in female Gothic can be many. But a ready explanation lies in the age-old character type of the masculine woman in Chinese literature, who functions as a pro- rather than anti- patriarchy signifier. In other words, the subversive/horrific potential of gender crossing is co-opted by national(ist), implying patriarchal, interests. The most famous patriarchal female transvestite is perhaps Hua Mulan, who impersonates

her elderly father's nonexistent male heir to report to the army. If her femininity incurs an irretrievable loss in fighting like (actually *as*) a man, she is redeemed not only by her allegiance to the empire but also by her complicity with and conformity to patriarchal gender roles as underscored by her voluntary retirement to the boudoir after twelve years on the battlefield.<sup>5</sup> Hua Mulan's modern avatars abound in the 1920s-1940s leftist literature. As a radicalized version of the "new woman," women revolutionaries joined the ranks of Chinese patriots to fight class exploitation as well as imperialist aggression. As Zhang Yingjin notes, in creating heroic heroines to propel the nation to action, a program of masculinization was carried out to rid modern (especially militant) women of quintessential "feminine" traits such as sensuality and sentimentality (198-9). In his *Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature*, Zhou Zuyan takes as *a priori* the subversiveness of androgyny,<sup>6</sup> but I contend that the conceptual and historical subversiveness of androgyny has to be deciphered in contrast to accepted and reaffirmed ideologies and power structures. Given the extolled lineage of *jinguo yingxiong* 巾帼英雄 or *nü zhangfu* 女丈夫, i.e., female heroes, in the Chinese literary imagination, it is safe to assume that by the time Zhang embarked on her literary career transvestism and

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the physique of the Chinese androgyny is less commented upon than the costume. It is telling that the phrase that describes the transgender female is "nǚ ban nán zhuang," the female donning male clothes. The physique of the female is generally glossed over and only mentioned when necessary. Graphic portraits of such characters even retain quintessential feminine characteristics. Hua Mulan, is depicted with small feet (see illustrations in Judge 18 and Zeitlin 124), however it is unlikely and absurd for a veteran general who has numerous military victories to her credit.

<sup>6</sup> According to Zhou, androgyny is "one's drive to deviate from or resist culturally/politically prescribed gender positions, particularly the institutionalized yin status of women and marginalized men, for the pursuit of a wholesome identity" (4). His androgynes include (1) women who defy the conventional expectations for their sex for masculine pursuits such as subjectivity in love and political ideals and (2) men who embrace a politically marginal status to preserve their personal integrity. Zhou's focus, however, is on the latter group. His study "largely explore[s] male scholars' gender identity, often on a symbolic level, through their literary characterizing" (4).

transgenderism had become such a normative motif that they had lost any exploitable “Gothic” value.

Rather than populating her fictional world with manly-looking freakish women, Zhang exploits the hair-raising value of *hyperfeminine* traditional character types—the shrew and the female ghost/spirit. Since I have treated extensively Zhang’s refashioning of the female ghost/spirit lover in her modern *chuanqi* in Chapter One, I will spend a few words here on the shrew. The shrew is aptly described in a Chinese phrase *hedong shihou* 河东狮吼 (literally “the lioness roars”). The proverb projects the image of a woman who is verbally abusive and physically violent. Wu Yenna in “The Inversion of Marital Hierarchy: Shrewish Wives and Henpecked Husbands in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature” depicts the shrew in these terms: she “poses an immediate threat to her husband both physically and psychologically: she could make his life miserable by constantly bullying him. . . . Moreover, she could be a threat to the harmony and solidarity of her husband’s family by fighting with her in-laws. . . .” or by intimidating and even harming her husband’s other wives/concubines out of jealousy and rivalry (365). Such a description captures to some extent Qiqiao in “The Golden Cangue” and Nixi in “The Interlocking Chains” 连环套 (*Lianhuantao*), though it is important to bear in mind that Zhang makes new/feminist use of old/misogynist character types as I have shown in Chapter One. I will give a detailed analysis of Qiqiao later in this chapter. “The Interlocking Chains” is addressed in more details in Chapter Three.

To illustrate the points above, I will look at representative works by Welty,

McCullers, and Zhang. Specifically I will analyze Welty's "The June Recital" and "A Memory," McCullers's "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," and Zhang's "The Golden Cangue."

Miss Eckhart in "The June Recital" (also see "The Whole World Knows," "The Music from Spain," and "The Wanderers") is an offense to the social mores of the fictional Southern town called Morgana. It is the compulsion of the town to locate people, especially women, according to their origin, religious affinity, and marriage. But Miss Eckhart keeps mystifying the small town. Though she is known for her German descent and Northern origins, no one knows exactly from where and why she moves to Morgana, and she goes to a mysterious Lutheran church unknown to the Presbyterian community. All the women of her generation in Morgana are married. Even the worst possible husband like King McClain is better than none, because marriage is what definitively "places" a woman in the small town society. She alone remains single and is determined to make a living by teaching piano. The townswomen allow themselves to be addressed by their first names, but Miss Eckhart insists on being called only by her last name, which immortalizes her foreignness and spinsterhood. Instead of having claim to marriage and kids, she is associated with more than one sexual scandal. One evening, when she walks alone after dark (which no respectable woman would do for fear of her name), she is assaulted by a "crazy Negro" ("June" 301). Rather than accepting the town's condolences and unspoken directive for her to move away, she acts as if nothing happened. For a time she is in a strange sort of romance with Mr. Sissum, the local shoe-store salesman who plays the cello. Morgana never approves of it. After he is drowned one summer, "all alone," she breaks

through the circle of mourners to get closer to his grave, as if she would throw herself onto the coffin ("June" 297, 299). In a word, her independence from the identity-grounding forces and apparent sexual "looseness" or impropriety threaten to overwhelm the little town's sense of decorum.

Corresponding to her overflowing social limits, she is a fiend-like overpowering woman. As Peter Schimit explains, the name of the imaginary town "Morgana" featured in *The Golden Apples* is "associated with dangerous supernatural beings such as Fata Morgana in Ariosto, Morgan le Fay in English legends, and ... the three Gorgans, including the Medusa" ("June" 100). The only qualified Medusa in town is Miss Eckhart. As Cassie, one of her former students recalls, her studio is like the witch's house in *Hansel and Gretel*. "Including the witch," Cassie's mother further states ("June" 288). Miss Eckhart is round and heavy, a powerful presence ready to slap the erring fingers of her students with a flyswatter. Every June, in the heat of the summer, she orders Morgana around with absolute authority in preparation for the recital. A new dress must be made for every pupil every year according to her specifications, although it will not be fit to wear to any other occasions. The room is decorated in exactly the way she wants (even if it means that she needs to take chairs from Mr. Voight, who tries to scare Miss Eckhart's students away by baring his teeth horribly and exposing his genitalia), and the program be kept strictly a secret until the night of the recital. As Mr. Morrison (the voice of the community as the head of the single local newspaper) comments, the whole thing is "like a military operation" in its tactics and dress ("June" 308). As a sinister double to the public recital,

she offers an impromptu concert to her students, her body swelling to enormous proportions on a thunderous summer day. "Miss Eckhart played as if it were Beethoven; she struck the music open midway and it was in soft yellow tatters like old satin. The thunder rolled and Miss Eckhart frowned and bent forward or she leaned back to play; at moments her solid body swayed from side to side like a tree trunk" ("June" 300). Her giant body becomes a symbol of female artistry and self-empowerment, threatening beyond words. "Her skin flattened and drew across her cheeks, her lips changed. The face could have belonged to someone else—not even to a woman, necessarily. It was the face a mountain could have, or what might be behind the veil of a waterfall" ("June" 300). The preternatural power she assumes bursts with such violence that Cassie can hardly bear it. "She stood back in the room with her whole body averted as if to ward off blows from Miss Eckhart's strong left hand" ("June" 301).

A grotesque female does not need to come from outside or nowhere. Miss Amelia in "Ballad of the Sad Cafe" is a home-grown Amazon. The daughter of a well-established store-keeper in a rural town, she inherits from her father the status of a privileged and respected member of the community. The town predicts comfortable marriage and domesticity for the quasi-aristocratic Miss Amelia, but like Miss Eckhart she refuses to be placeable. She does give marriage (the institution that settles women for good in the townspeople's mind) a shot, but her marriage is "strange and dangerous," leaving the whole town "wondering and shocked" ("Ballad" 198). As powerful as Miss Eckhart is, with Mr. Sissum she behaves not entirely unlike the heroine of a conventional romantic



enthralment. The whole town knows she is “sweet” on him (“Ballad” 297). Mr. Sissum plays the cello at the local political gatherings. “Miss Eckhart, the true musician, [sits] on the damp night grass and listen[s]” (“Ballad” 297). Miss Amelia, however, shows not a bit of passivity or accommodation appropriate for her gender in a sexual relationship. For no apparent reason, she thwarts with unflagging will and violence her husband Marvin’s sexual demands from day one. And no more than ten days passed before she runs him off her property all together. After that, she lives alone making liquor, doing masonry, and pursuing fierce lawsuits, all as a man would. In chasing the dollar, she shows no transcendence or leniency as would be becoming in a woman. “Mortgages on crops and property, a sawmill, money in the bank—she was the richest woman for miles around” (“Ballad” 199). Then when she is thirty years old, she further scandalizes the town by taking in a queer little hunchbacked dwarf, Cousin Lymon. Unconventional is a mild word to use for her romantic/parental relationship with the dwarf. This time she completely inverts traditional gender roles. Cousin Lymon’s stunted stature mimics the diminutive form of white womanhood. The fact that he is weakly and deformed aligns him with the stereotypical fragile, and even invalid, ladies. For this dependent sickling, Miss Amelia assumes the role of the loving provider. After she converts the general store into a café, the dwarf, being extremely sociable, plays the part of the ingratiating center of the café, entertaining and gossiping with the guests. Miss Amelia goes on making liquor and running the store. As Theodosiadou says in “Crossing Gender Lines: The Crisis of Southern Womanhood in the Work of Carson McCullers,” “She is the physically dominant

one who provides a living for the household and he is the pampered mate who functions as the hostess of the café" ("Ballad" 278).

As with the character of Miss Eckhart, Miss Amelia's gender transgression is externalized in an unappealing body. But whereas Miss Eckhart's enormity only gestures towards unwomanly sublimity, Miss Amelia's gigantic frame is in unmistakable possession of quintessential masculine qualities. "She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead" ("Ballad" 198). She smokes and drinks and has hair on her thighs. In contrast with the dwarf who wears "stockings" and has a dire fear of danger, "she spen[ds] whole nights back in her shed in the swamp, dressed in overalls and gum boots" ("Ballad" 198, 209). After Marvin comes back and disrupts her relationship with the dwarf, Miss Amelia fights him with extraordinary physical strength reminiscent of an Amazon. Her physical/sexual dominance as exemplified by the following paragraph completes her grotesque character.

For a while the fighters grappled muscle to muscle, their hipbones braced against each other. Backward and forward, from side to side, they swayed in this way ... Now the test had come, and in these moments of terrible effort, it was Miss Amelia who was the stronger ... Gradually she bent him over backward, and inch by inch she forced him to the floor. It was a terrible thing to watch and their deep hoarse breaths were the only sound in the café. At last she had him down, and straddled; her strong hands were on his throat. ("Ballad" 250)

The "embodiment" of gender transgressions as extra flesh, plus size and, ultimately, transsexualism (masculinization) are the subject of a number of insightful studies. Patricia Yaeger, for instance, argues that the gigantism of transgressive females in Southern women's writing undermines the myth of petite Southern ladyhood. Drawing on

Bryan Turner's theory of the body and social control, Yaeger suggests that the miniturized compass of the ideal white woman's body paradoxically bears racial and gender burdens of epic proportions. She is not "naturally" petite and vulnerable but the postbellum South crafts for her such an image so that she remains in her place of subordination to the white male. Her delicacy is also the best pretext to rationalize white violence and brutality against the black race in the postbellum competition for wealth and status. In other words, the trope of miniature southern woman, with the "southern rape complex" as its crucial corollary, is created and used by the ruling white male to simultaneously frustrate the upward efforts of both the lesser sex and lesser race. By way of refuting the constructed fragility of white womanhood, the gargantuan, masculine women created by Welty, McCullers, and other Southern women writers "hollow out" the self-righteous sexist and racist practices of the white man (292-3).

Although Yaeger skillfully unpacks the gender/racial investment in the petite white womanhood and illuminates the subversive nature of gigantic women characters in Southern women's writings, her analysis always treats the giantess's subversion of racial lines as a byproduct of her gender crossing. In other words, the overpowering body of the female grotesque crosses from fragile womanhood to mighty manhood, but is irrelevant to the cultural construction of distinct racial body types. However, I contend that the largess is a grave danger to the white male South because she simultaneously jumbles up gender *and* racial boundaries.

Literary critics and cultural historians alike have observed that the South has built

its social edifices upon highly articulated binaries, white over black, free over slave, male over female. It has likewise created absolute opposites within the female gender, which Diane Roberts meticulously catalogues in *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, a study of women character types in Faulkner's fiction: asexual plantation mistress over nymphomaniac black harem, incorporeal white mother over physical black mammy, pure precious virgin over pitiful yet potentially pernicious spinster. The most important and long-lasting opposition these binaries suggest is one between the vast, protruding, and sexualized body of the black servant and the small, closed, and incorporeal body of the white lady. In this light, the gigantism of Miss Eckhart and Miss Amelia is a direct assault on racist stereotyping of women. In other words, their enormity not only conflates femininity and masculinity but also gestures towards a shift of affinity from whiteness to blackness. While racial mixing (or rather the fear of racial mixing) is deflated by Miss Eckhart's insouciance towards her encounter with a "crazy Negro," Miss Amelia's dark skin color, queer face, and obscure origin—nothing of her mother is known to the community (206)—simultaneously evokes and mocks the worst Southern fear—miscegenation. Since the inter-racial intra-gender division, like the inter-gender intra-racial demarcation, is bound up in the whole matrix of gender/racial oppression, the large body of Southern women writers' white women characters unravels the Southern social hierarchy on both ends.

With this understanding, I suggest that an intriguing story by Welty named "A Memory" be read as an allegory of the destruction of Southern social mores by the figure

of the colossal (read: genderly *and* racially ambiguous) woman.

The little girl in “A Memory,” a very likely avatar of Welty herself, develops an obsession with framing everything around her with her fingers. “To watch everything about me I regarded firmly and possessively as a *need*. All through this summer I had lain on the sand beside the small lake, with my hands squared over my eyes, finger tips touching, looking out by this device to see everything: which appeared as a kind of projection” (“Memory” 75-76; original emphasis). This preoccupation with “squaring” things into a picture frame began, as the narrator tells us, with her painting lessons. But the “hand-made” framing device, as revealed immediately, is a cognitive as well as a graphic exercise. “I was at an age when I formed a judgment upon every person and every event which came under my eye . . . I felt a necessity for absolute conformity to my ideas in any happening I witnessed” (ibid.). Not only does she “need” to see everything, she also needs to see it *her* way. As Yaeger notes, the perspective from which her world is “framed” is intricately linked with her southern middle-class protestant heritage (305). What she sees then must be ultimately a result, a “projection” of her sense of social hierarchy and boundaries, which explains why she feels a secret of life (i.e., underlying social values) consistently unfolds for her no matter what she sees (“Memory” 76). So far as this girl represents the dominant social group and its urge to keep everything in place, she *is* the southern power structure, gender, racial, and other social boundaries.

It is telling that her sense of order and well-being develops with her emergent gender awareness. The narrator confesses it is her first time falling in love and her object

of love is a boy she hardly knows. They have never exchanged a word or even a nod of recognition. Nevertheless, she meditates obsessively on the moment she touches his wrist as if by accident. In her imagination, this slightest contact “swell[s] with a sudden and overwhelming beauty, like a rose forced into premature bloom for a great occasion” (“Memory” 76). It behooves her little lady status that she can imagine no romance other than such an incorporeal and spiritual one. One day, in the midst of the protective “dreariness” and “regularity” of a school day, her secret sweetheart has a nosebleed, which occasions much confusion and causes some older girls to laugh. As Yaeger explains, her self-perception as the inferior sex is challenged by the equalizing blood, and to restore the superiority of the male gender, she faints (306).

Although she successfully heads off the “untoward thing” (76) and restores gender hierarchy in her romantic dream, she soon finds her world ravaged by the obese, ungainly bodies of an “ill-assorted” working family (77). She finds their fat bodies disgusting, and their energy uncontrollable, mean, and evil. She is particularly horrified by the adult woman, who in her eyes is the epitome of all grotesqueries.

She was unnaturally white and fatly aware, in a bathing suit which had no relation to the shape of her body. Fat hung upon her upper arms like an arrested earthslide on a hill. With the first motion she might make, I was afraid that she would slide down upon herself into a terrifying heap. Her breasts hung heavy and widening like pears into her bathing suit. Her legs lay prone one on the other like shadowed bulwarks, uneven and deserted, upon which, from the man’s hand, the sand piled higher like the teasing threat of oblivion. A slow, repetitious sound I had been hearing for a long time unconsciously, I identified as a continuous laugh which came through the motionless open pouched mouth of the woman. (“Memory” 78)

This gargantuan woman, as Yaeger points out, inundates reification of femininity in

the South as petite and delicate (289-290). It mocks the justification of racial violence as a means of protecting small white women. Furthermore, her protruding breasts and lips blur the racial line. As Roberts claims, whereas the white mother, the classical body, is ideally distant, incorporeal, sublimated to embody the ideology (white supremacy) of the white South, the mammy takes on all the physical functions (and needs) of motherhood and performs all the duties of the self-sacrificial mother in the place of her white mistress (41). While this Ozymandias is white to the point of being “unnatural,” her body emits forth unmistakable fecundity, which in the South has been historically been associated with the black mammy figure. On top of it all, her apparent enjoyment of the sensuous caress of the sand falling from her partner’s hand hurts the eyes of the gazing little lady, ridiculing her touch-of-the-wrist romance.

But the peak of her grotesquerie is reached when she shamelessly exposes her breasts. “She bent over and in a condescending way pulled down the front of her bathing suit, turning it outward, so that the lumps of mashed and folded sand came emptying out. I felt a peak of horror, as though her breasts themselves had turned to sand, as though they were of no importance at all and she did not care” (“Memory” 79). Instead of enacting fragility/purity and toeing the line of modesty, the Ozymandias in “A Memory” opens her body to public gaze with much gusto and ferocity. She dares those around her (especially the little white girl) to look at her, to partake in her unrestricted, unashamed femininity. At the end of the story, the little girl can imagine her romance no more, because the gargantuan woman, who is in Welty’s words “a single, entire human being, who will never

be contained in any frame" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 90), has irreversibly exploded her judging frame.

We have seen how the grotesque women characters in the stories written by Welty and McCullers epitomize excess, in terms of both bodily enlargement and gender/racial crossing. Zhang's stories likewise present a number of frightening iconoclastic heroines, but their breach of gender constrictions are not necessarily indexed by physical massiveness. Instead, their bodies may be marked by atrophy, hyper-femininity and other creepy qualities. I will use "The Golden Cangu," one of Zhang's most critically acclaimed novellas, to illustrate my point.

The ironically named Cao Qiqiao (which means "seven dexterities") is married into the aristocratic Jiang family only because the second master is an invalid suffering from tuberculosis of the bones.<sup>7</sup> The marriage secures for her a life of material comfort but denies her sexual satisfaction. Propelled by an unappeased libido, she strikes violently, albeit blindly, at the "golden cangu" that imprisons her. Old Mrs. Jiang (also known as Old Mistress) lifts her from concubinage to full wifehood in the hope that she will "faithfully" look after Second Master ("Golden" 173). But Qiqiao never attempts to hide her disgust at the emaciated body of her husband. The whole household avoids mouthing his disease "tuberculosis," but Qiqiao refuses to use any euphemism. With Second Master in the room, she complains loudly to her sister-in-law that he is totally lifeless. "Sit up and

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<sup>7</sup> Jiang = Chiang; Jize = Chi-tse; Chang'an = Ch'ang-an; Changbai = Ch'ang-pai; Zhishou = Chih-shou; Tong Shifang = T'ung Shih-fang.



the spine slides down, not even as tall as my three-year-old, to look at” (“Golden” 190).

Her fidelity is also in question. While there is suspicion of the legitimacy of her children, Qiqiao also takes the initiative to seduce the Third Master Jize. She is a far cry from the self-abnegating wifedom extolled by Confucian morality.

Neither is she a good mother. Frustrated by years of sexual deprivation, Qiqiao displaces her anger on her daughter Chang'an and daughter-in-law Zhishou, obstructing their opportunities for normal social and sexual lives. Chang'an has an enjoyable stint of school life. But when some of her quilts go missing at the school laundry, Qiqiao threatens to interrogate the principal. For fear of her mother's flares of temper, Chang'an drops out of school and gives up on self-improvement. She grows more and more like Qiqiao. When she has dysentery, Qiqiao gives her opium for medicine, to which she soon becomes addicted. Her addiction coupled with Qiqiao's reputation diminishes her prospects, which were not very bright in the first place. When she finally gets engaged at thirty, Qiqiao frightens off her would-be son-in-law Tong Shifang.

In addition, Qiqiao shows a perverse interest in her son Changbai's marital life. A few days after his wedding, Qiqiao keeps Changbai in her room to spend the night. She makes him cook opium for her and pries into the newlyweds' privacy. The next morning, Qiqiao invites relatives over, including Zhishou's mother, to play mahjong. “She told in detail all her daughter-in-law's secrets as confessed by her son, adding some touches of her own that made the story still more vivid” (“Golden” 215). From then on, she frequently detains Changbai in her room and continues to get vicarious pleasure out of his confessions.

Zhishou hates Changbai so much that “her teeth itched to bite” (“Golden” 217). For Zhishou: “This is an insane world, a husband is not like a husband, a mother-in-law is not like a mother-in-law” (“Golden” 216). Before long, Zhishou falls ill and eventually commits suicide.

It is important to note that Qiqiao’s blatant violation of feminine ideals is indexed not in bodily enormity or masculinity. She is instead of petite stature and attractive features. Only, her feminine charm, coupled with venom and aggression, emanates such an ominous aura that it evokes the historical characteristics of such notorious Chinese *femmes fatales* as Pan Jinlian<sup>8</sup> in *The Golden Lotus* 金瓶梅 (Jinping Mei) and ghost seductresses in *Liaozhai*. Zhang carefully reveals her spectral aspect in her very first appearance in the novella.

Four years into her marriage, in one of their morning greeting rituals to pay respect to the head of the household, Old Mrs. Jiang, Qiqiao is again late for the gathering of the in-laws in front of Old Mrs. Jiang’s room. The in-laws, waiting for Old Mrs. Chiang to wake up, have been sharing with themselves the private jokes in the household. The intimate, communal atmosphere is promptly disrupted by the entrance of Qiqiao.

As they were talking and laughing in undertones, Liu-hsi raised the curtain with a stick, announcing, “Second Mistress is here.”

Lan-hsien and Yün-tse rose to ask her to sit down but Ts’ao Ch’i-ch’iao<sup>9</sup> would

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<sup>8</sup> *The Golden Lotus* is traditionally ranked with *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三国演义 (Sanguo yanyi), *The Water Margin* 水浒传 (Shuihu zhuan), and *Journey to the West* 西游记 (Xi you ji) as one of the four great novels of the Ming Period. It creates one of the most famous prototypes of Chinese *femmes fatales*, Pan Jinlian, who murders her husband after committing adultery. Some critics have noted the influence of *The Golden Lotus* on Zhang’s characterization of female protagonists (see, for example, Hoyan 244-246) and Zhang acknowledges directly that *The Golden Lotus* has been inspirational to her writing in the preface to *A Nightmare of Red Mansions* 红楼梦魔 (Honglou mengyan), her critical study of *A Dream of Red Mansions* (4-5).

<sup>9</sup> Qiqiao is rendered “Ch’i-ch’iao” in Zhang Ailing’s translation of the story. Zhang adopts Wade-Giles system to

not be seated as yet. With one hand on the doorway and the other on her waist, she first looked around. On her thin face were a vermilion mouth, triangular eyes, and eyebrows curved like little hills. She wore a pale pink blouse over narrow mauve trousers with a flickering blue scroll design and greenish-white incense-stick bindings. A lavender silk crepe handkerchief was half tucked around the wrist in one narrow blouse sleeve. She smiled, showing her small fine teeth, and said, "Everybody's here. I suppose I'm late again today. How can I help it, doing my hair in the dark? Who gave me a window facing the back yard? I'm the only one to get a room like that. That one of ours is evidently not going to live long anyway, we're just waiting to be widow and orphans—whom to bully, if not us?" ("Golden" 178)

Out of the room "grave" in which she is buried alive with the lifeless flesh of her bedridden husband, she emerges victoriously in excessive make-up and elaborate attire. The more vibrant Qiqiao is the more sinister is her association with the dead and dark. Her vermilion mouth and shining white teeth bear vivid resemblance to those of bloodthirsty demons in *Liaozhai*. Exuberant with vitality and a pronounced malice, she is unmistakably a ghostly and vicious creature of revenge.

Zhang introduces us to Qiqiao's aggressive rhetoric as well as her sinister nature in this scene. Qiqiao refuses to be categorized as a woman of submission. Before her arrival, the in-laws judged her lateness as a result of indulgence in smoking opium. She immediately fends it off by blaming the oppressive darkness of her room. Her "explanation" of her tardiness is confrontational: underlined in her defense for her action is the accusation of others' free exploitation of her disadvantaged situation. I suggest that her verbal bellicosity makes her readily identifiable with another traditional agent of fear—the shrew. Unlike the ghost seductress, a shrew does not possess supernatural power, but she is nevertheless frightening because she represents and amplifies all "feminine" vice in the

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romanize names of the characters. I am using the pinyin system.

Chinese imagination. Among all the feminine ills that the shrew embodies, improper and aggressive language stands out. As mentioned before, Gu summarizes ideal womanhood in three obediences and four virtues. What's especially worth noting here is the tenet on womanly speech. According to Gu, "Womanly conversation means not eloquence or brilliant talk, but refined choice of words, never to use coarse or violent language, to know when to speak and when to stop speaking" (75). Such an injunction obviously is aimed at suppressing women's self-expression. A woman should use speech with caution and in scarcity. Even when she needs to be loquacious, her verbosity should come to precious nothing. Even less should it be unpleasant or provoking. Qiqiao, however, is glib and cutting, her speech often crude and sexually charged.

In the same domestic scene, she exercises her tongue to test the limit of others' tolerance and challenge the sense of "decency" of her peers. Complaining about the lack of privacy in a crowded household, Qiqiao teases the new addition to the household, Lan-hisen, the Third Sister-in-Law: "So Third Sister feels there're too many people. If it's too crowded for us who have been married for years, naturally it's too crowded for newlyweds like you" ("Golden" 178-179). Qiqiao's sarcastic remark is inflammatory, for she breaks the taboo of talking about sex in public. The reference to boudoir intimacy not only underscores the vulgarity of her rhetoric, but also brings forth a challenge to the notion of propriety.

Whereas Qiqiao uses aggressive language as defense and protest in her early life, after her position in the family changes from that of a despised daughter-in-law to that of

the authoritarian mother and mother-in-law, she uses her tongue as a lethal weapon to cut down her underlings.<sup>10</sup> Time and again her “flat sharp” voice is compared to “a razor blade” that cuts everything around (“Golden” 212, 232). For example, on the day of her son Changbai’s wedding, Qiqiao comes out of the bridal chamber after taking a look at the bride.

Ch’ang-an overtook her at the doorway and whispered, “Fair-skinned, only the lips are a bit too thick.”

Ch’i-ch’iao leaned a hand on the doorway, took a gold ear-spoon from her bun to scratch her head with, and laughed sardonically. “Don’t start on that now. Your new sister-in-law’s lips, chop them up and they’ll make a heaping dish!”

“Well, it’s said that people with thick lips have warm feelings,” said a lady beside her.

Ch’i-ch’iao snorted; pointing her gold ear-spoon at the woman; she lifted an eyebrow and said with a crooked little smile, “It isn’t so nice to have warm feelings. I can’t say much in front of young ladies—just hope our Master Pai<sup>11</sup> won’t die in her hands.” Ch’i-ch’iao was born with a high clear voice, which had grown less shrill as she grew older, but it was still cutting, or rather rasping, like a razor blade. Her last remark could not be called loud, nor was it exactly soft. Could the bride, surrounded by a crowd as she was, possibly have registered a quiver on her severely flat face and chest? Probably it was just a reflection of the flames leaping on the tall pair of dragon-and-phoenix candles. (“Golden” 212)

Qiqiao is her old iconoclastic self in this episode: her combative posture and vicious remarks shatter the cheerful atmosphere of the wedding. Instead of offering blessings, she threatens the young couple with mutilation and death. To revenge her suffering and deprivation, she strikes savagely at her defenseless daughter-in-law. The heinous imagery conjured up by her remarks: human body parts, explicitly Zhishou’s lips

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note, although Qiqiao succeeds in transforming her gender from the marginal *yin* to the powerful *yang*, she is a case of gender perversion instead of androgyny. According to Zhou Zuyan, while androgyny leads to transcendence over gender dichotomy and a wholesome identity of balanced gender attributes, gender perversion inverts the gender role of the individual character but preserves the gender hierarchy (4-5). Qiqiao gains access to power and wealth, her abuse of and dominance over her family reiterates and reinforces gender oppression.

<sup>11</sup> Master Pai refers to Qiqiao’s son Changbai (romanized as Ch’ang-pai in the translation)

and implicitly her labia, cut up and served as food is suggestive of both sadism and cannibalism. Qiqiao's repressed sexual energy is displaced by a sadistic lust for blood. Zhang makes it clear that the instrument of Qiqiao's perverse violence is none other than her voice, i.e. her doom-spelling and soul-shattering words.

The victimized and victimizing Qiqiao meets a gruesome end herself. Significantly, her life of transgression and aggression results in a shriveled, rather than bloated, body. On her death-bed, she is emaciated to such a point that her arm, which used to be round, has become "as thin as firewood" and she is able to push her green jade bracelet up her bony arm until it reaches the armpit ("Golden" 234).

### **Zhang's Defective Grotesques**

We have looked at transgressive grotesques as represented by Qiqiao in Zhang's work. However, a considerable number of the grotesque figures in Zhang's fiction are not conscious rule-breakers. Rather, these ugly women are conscientious conformists to patriarchal ideals of womanhood. Only, no matter how hard they try, they inevitably fail to meet the socially upheld standards of femininity. Accordingly, as much as they may strive to be the paragon of beauty in the eyes of man, they fall short of the objective and become, comically or tragically, lacking. The existence of such defective grotesques in Zhang's works points to the viability of an alternative strategy of writing the grotesque.

In an underrated story called "Waiting" 等 (Deng), Zhang uses the slice-of-life technique to draw a group portraiture of Chinese wives. The story is set in the waiting room of a private massage clinic. Here various female characters converge and think aloud

their private troubles. While the clinic promises relief for their bodily aches and ailments, the waiting room serves as a safe outlet for the grievances of wifehood. Although “Waiting” peeps into the life of half a dozen women under drastically different circumstances, it interweaves the particular trajectories in such a way that they reflect on, overlap, and extend each other to form a larger picture of wifehood in distress. Like the hysterical, explosive heroines in her earlier stories (Qiqiao in “The Golden Chague” and Nixi in “Interlocking Chains”), they have been forced to live a life of material or sexual (but very often both) deprivation. But unlike their transgressive counterparts, these Mrs.’s are traditionalists, as evidenced by their continued loyalty to traditional Chinese medicine in a Westernized (modernized) Shanghai. Instead of protesting and resisting culturally imposed self-denial, they either seek the comforting illusion of martyrdom or internalize the cultural practice of blaming the victim, i.e., seeking justification of patriarchal injustice in their own “inadequacy.” Because Mrs. Xi interacts with every one of the other female characters (except “Yi Taitai,” the concubine of a Mr. Gao, whom the proper wives scorn) and their life has somewhat rubbed off on her, I suggest that her story lies at the heart of the general picture of female affliction. Therefore I will focus on her as the subject of the following analysis.

While the others come and go in the narrow circumference of the waiting room like actors going on and off stage, Mrs. Xi is present from the beginning to the end of the story. We know from her dialogue with Ah Fang, Doc. Pang’s unmarried daughter, that Mrs. Xi’s husband moved to the hinterland with Jiang Jieshi’s army after Shanghai fell to

Japanese control.<sup>12</sup> She has good reason to suspect he has taken another wife.

Nevertheless she tries to justify his infidelity in terms of a nationalistic imperative.

Grabbing hold of a newspaper, she beat the sofa with it and said, "Mr. Jiang issued the order, calling on them to take [concubines/wives]—urging them to! The war caused a huge loss in human lives. It is high time to encourage procreation, so he issues the directive which says you can remarry if you have been separated from your wife for two years. Now they are not called concubines either. Second Mistress is the name. All this is done for fear that officials won't stay focused on their work with no one attending to their needs. They are urged to take wives." (93-94; my translation)<sup>13</sup>

More importantly, she unconsciously blames her deteriorating looks for his infidelity. She repeatedly voices her concern that she has aged a great deal for the past two years. What's most worrisome is her hair loss. Her alopecia might very well be attributed to her anxiety over being replaced by another woman. Loss of hair and insecurity over her position are indeed closely connected in her thinking. In the following paragraph, she complains about hair loss and acknowledges the abundance of her substitutes in one breath.

Mrs. Xi nudged forward, speaking in an undertone, "No. my hair is going off like mad. For no reason at all it is all falling off." The whole room is listening, Mrs. Xi feels deserving of such an honor, a tinge of pride flashing in her lament. She gestured with a fistful of mesh bag, "... you don't know what it is like in there. People send themselves over to you when you are in a high position. They really come of their own accord." ("Waiting" 94)

In her logic, her shaky position is as much a result of her bodily disorder as it is a reason for it. She secretly suspects that her diminished charm, literalized by her thinning

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<sup>12</sup> Jiang Jieshi (or Chiang Kai-shek) was the president of the Republic of China and led the ruling nationalist party (also known as KMT) during the Second Sino-Japanese War. After the war broke out in July 1937, Jiang sent his best-trained and equipped soldiers to defend Shanghai. But Shanghai and then Nanjing—the capital city of the nationalist government—fell to the Japanese. Jiang moved the government inland, first to Wuhan and later to Chongqing. Devoid of economic and industrial resources, Chiang withdrew his army into the hinterlands, stretching the Japanese supply lines and bogging down Japanese soldiers in the vast Chinese interior.

<sup>13</sup> Translations from "Waiting" are mine.



hair, is the real reason why Mr. Xi has taken a second wife. Her attitude that wives have only themselves to blame for their husbands' depravity is rendered apparent by her reaction to Mrs. Tong. While Mr. Xi lives only with the imaginary existence of a second wife, Mrs. Tong lives with her husband *and* his concubine. Mrs. Tong regards herself as a devoted mother and conscientious wife. Her husband is good-for-nothing, and she has been providing for the family out of her dowry for these great many years. Most recently, Mr. Tong got himself in trouble (implicitly visiting prostitutes) and was put in jail. Mrs. Tong went to extraordinary lengths—and expense—to get him out, but the first thing he did when he got home was to “sneak” into the room of his concubine (“Waiting” 97). Mrs. Tong regrets that she has listened to a Buddhist monk and let her husband run wild. Mrs. Xi has her own opinions, one of which is that Mrs. Tong is “an ancient idiot”—she should blame her lack of feminine charm instead. She praises Mrs. Tong for assuming the traditionally masculine role of a provider, calling her a “nǚ zhangfu” 女丈夫 (female hero) (“Waiting” 97). It is important to note that although “female hero” implies female adoption of male attributes, it may not be associated with gender fluidity or equality. As Judith Zeitlin points out, such characters violate gender norms only to uphold the dearest values of the Confucian patriarchy in addition to its implicit valorization of the male over the female principle (116-125). That Mrs. Tong plays the traditionally masculine role of a provider should not be read as an act of subversion of gender norms. Instead, her action is motivated by self-identification as a good Confucian wife and mother and daughter-in-law (she as well as Mr. Xi seek confirmation from the in-laws), and is aimed at sustaining the

male-centered family. It follows that Mrs. Xi's compliment to Mrs Tong should be read as an expression of allegiance to, rather than rebellion against, patriarchal gender imperatives. Furthermore, Mrs. Xi's internalization of patriarchal logic leads her to be repulsed by Mrs. Tong. Sympathy is out of the question, because she unconsciously justifies Mr. Tong's ingratitude and absurdity by what she sees as Mrs. Tong's repugnant body.

Mrs. Tong stood erect . . . short-legged and pot-bellied, rouged face and pink cheeks, reminiscent of the boys in the "hundred sons" portrait of ancient China. She reached out for her grey fleece-lined gown. Slowly whirling it on, she stirred up a gust of wind, enveloping the whole room. The tip of the gown touched Mrs. Xi on her shoulder and face, sending her ducking with palpable disgust. ("Waiting" 100)

Mrs. Xi sees Mrs. Tong as ugly and repugnant, blaming the victim for her mistreatment. It is then only natural that she would blame herself for her husband's infidelity. Unlike Mrs. Tong, whose lack of feminine charm is manifested by excessive fat, her own inadequacy is embodied in her thinning hair. In the closing scene of the story, Mrs. Xi thinks of her husband with "tenderness" (102). "Her husband will come back sooner or later. Pray it not be too late—not too late! But not too soon either, it takes time for her hair to grow back" ("Waiting" 102).

Mrs. Xi's sense of inadequacy is localized as an obsession with one's looks. For Mrs. Lou in "Great Felicity" 鸿鸳鸯喜 (Hongyuanxi), her lacking is manifested everywhere. Her husband is way out of her league in people's eyes. So many are "indignant on his behalf" ("Great" 45). Mr. Lou has studied in the US and worked his way to a position of great respect and power in Shanghai's banking industry. He is extremely capable, an ingratiating personality in his circles. In contrast, Mrs. Lou lacks social skills and she is not

pretty. Her homely face resembles a rice ball made by children, shapeless and mixed with dust ("Great" 44). In the eyes of her own husband, who reads *Esquire*, she is a Frankensteinian assembly of awkward, incongruent parts. A glance at his wife starts a string of proddings: "Do you *have* to cut your hair in a duck tail? If it's convenience you are after, just shave your head. Do you *have* to wear lilac stockings? Do you *have* to roll them down below your knees? Do you *have* to let your black slip show through the slit of your cheongsam?" ("Great" 44).

As the Lous are shooting up the social ladder, Mrs. Xi discovers more and more her "inadequacy."

Mrs. Lou felt isolated. The whole Lou family, her husband, her children, the young and old, so handsome, so competitive, she loved them all and they, time after time, banded together to think of different ways to prove her inadequate. Her husband had always been concerned about his reputation even when they were poor. He had always loved to socialize and was therefore always putting her in various embarrassing situations and, time and again, finding that she didn't measure up. As the family became wealthy, it should have meant an easier time, but she hadn't realized that as the parties became grander, she would find herself even more inadequate. ("Great" 49)

Mrs. Xi and Mrs. Lou are only two among the many "inadequate" ugly wives in Zhang's fictional world. Other examples include Yingzhu's mother in "The Wounded Century" 创世纪 (Chuang shiji), Meng Yanli in "Red Rose, White Rose" and Zhishou in "The Golden Cangue." They all live in constant anxiety and distress over negative self-images. Subject to even greater danger of self-doubt, however, are girls who have failed to secure a marriage proposal. The marriage-craving type appears in a great number of stories including Tangqian and Liqian in "Great Felicity," Miss Ashe in "Red Rose, White Rose," and Ah Fang in "Waiting." They are without exception tragically or

comically grotesque. Chuanchang in “A Withered Flower,” who is the subject of much discussion in Chapter One, attests most forcefully to the sense of inadequacy that is gnawing the souls of girls who are waiting in limbo until they are claimed by men. Her eyes, though large and beautiful, are compared to “a beacon tower without the beacon” (“Withered” 413). During the course of her illness, her body, which “slips” away as her marriage prospect diminishes, literalizes her growing sense of worthlessness (“Withered” 426).

We have seen in this chapter how each of the three writers under study has employed the Gothic motif of the grotesque character in her writings. Although in both Zhang’s China and Welty and McCuller’s South, transgressive, i.e, self-seeking and self-ish, women are deemed revolting, shocking and even blood-curdling, their grotesqueries are externalized in a variety of bodily forms. Due to the historical imbrication of race and gender definitions, the grotesque women characters as penned by Welty and McCullers derive their grotesque value from an uncanny fusion of culturally-defined racial features. Rather than embodying the petite and delicate physique of white womanhood, Miss Eckhart, Miss Amelia, and the gargantuan woman in “A Memory” are largesses whose bodily excess is not only unwomanly but also satirizes racial convention by virtue of its resemblance to the stereotypical enormity of black women. Crowding their South with such (gender and racial) border-defying protagonists, Welty and McCullers pose serious threats to racial as well as gender constructs of the white supremacist and androcentric South, and they deliberately provoke its worst fear, namely, miscegenation. Zhang’s stories likewise present a number of

frightening iconoclastic heroines, but their breach of gender constrictions is not necessarily indexed by physical massiveness. A transgressive grotesque like Qiqiao, as we have seen, meets her end in atrophy. Her hair-raising qualities rest upon her association with hyperfeminine traditional character types such as the ghost/spirit seductress and the shrew.

At the beginning of the chapter I suggested that there can be two types of female grotesque: the transgressive and the defective. While the transgressive woman is ugly because she blatantly disregards patriarchal delineation, the defective grotesque submits to patriarchal re-formation but is nonetheless repugnant because she fails to come out right. Although all three writers create memorable transgressive grotesques, only Zhang taps in full the subversive value of the defective type. By creating a fictional world in which not only transgressors are creepy but traditionalists are also repulsive, she posits the vision that “beauty” (i.e., normality) as promised for women who embrace recuperation is all but a lie. Between the American and Chinese writers, they expose ideal womanhood as a false unachievable standard, a means of oppression and control. It is a distorting mirror in which women are found either “too much” or “too little,” never meeting the standard, never achieving normality, much less beauty.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **CONFINEMENT**

Confinement is arguably the most basic motif in female Gothic. Critics have long noted how it is used by female writers to expose, protest, and interrogate the limitations and injuries patriarchy inflicts on women's physiques and psyches. Generally speaking, its textual manifestation ranges from physical enclosures to social restrictions and to psychological incarceration. In terms of physical structures, it has evolved from archaic/supernatural realms such as cathedral/castle dungeons and labyrinths to apparently quotidian sites including houses and the domestic interior. Accompanying this relocation of the carceral drama is a shift of emphasis from physical imprisonment to repressive customs and their internalization as psychological strictures. According to Wiesenfarth's analysis of Jane Austen's novels of manners and Emily Brontë's psychological dramas, manners and social "respectability" replaces the concrete walls of enclosure as the primary means of incarceration of women in modern Gothic (3, 21, 197). Other critics, especially those with a background in psychoanalysis, claim the psychological internalization of patriarchal constructions of femininity as the most formidable form of confinement

represented in female Gothic. For instance, Fleenor posits self-hate, which results from one's distorted image as reflected in the male gaze, as a key barrier that prevents women characters from a true understanding of the self and the attainment of autonomy (11-2).

It is important to note that physical, social, and psychological enclosures often intertwine in female Gothic narratives. In particular, the spatial forms assembled, amalgamated, recreated, and imagined by the writer usually bear out her understanding of the social relations and psychic forces that hold women in bondage. Quite a few attempts have been made to explore the connections between the physical representation of confinement and its socio-psychological significance in and out of the text. For instance, Gilbert and Gubar catalogue the patterns of enclosure in female-authored texts (including dark dungeons, houses, and paraphernalia of "woman's place") as primary symbols of the social incarceration of women. They also suggest that the dramas of imprisonment and escape enacted on the site of these enclosures manifest the woman writer's own conflicted state of mind: (1) anxiety of authorship, i.e. an anxiety rooted in fears that she is assuming authorship/authority (compared to an "alien and incomprehensible" place) which is by definition inappropriate for her sex, (2) her suspicion of and anger at separate spheres and her authorial desire to break through the "imprisonment" of femininity in male authored texts (*Madwoman* 51, 83-5). While Gilbert and Gubar psychologize the author, Claire Kahane speculates about the Gothic heroine's psychic relationship with the physical structure of incarceration. Employing revisionist versions (those of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein in particular) of Lacan's theory of psychosexual development, she

suggests that the Gothic house in which the heroine is trapped be read as the maternal body from which she needs to separate to gain a separate identity even though she continues to confuse the maternal body with her 'self' because of their shared anatomy and its symbolic place in a given culture/society (336-7). Therefore, the enclosures in female Gothic writings ultimately gesture towards the female protagonist's "ongoing battle with a mirror image that is both self and other" and the danger that she may be subject to the mother's destiny as biologically and socially determined (337).

In this chapter, I will follow these critics' steps to explore the socio-psychological significance of the physical space female protagonists inhabit. I will give close analysis to representative work by the three writers to illustrate three related points. First, Welty, McCullers and Zhang all use domestic spaces to spatialize and materialize the power dynamics and psychic forces that define but also entangle and entrap women's existence. Second, unlike her American counterparts whose spatial imagery mainly comprises structures and spaces basically extraneous to the physical body including houses, rooms, and indoor paraphernalia, Zhang makes extensive use of "small" intimate "bodily" spaces created by women's jewelry and clothing. Finally, while American stories primarily present the constriction of femininity as the social and psychological "cornering" of the "unmanned" (male-partner lacking) and thus aberrant female existence (as epitomized in the Southern stereotype of the spinster), Zhang's work takes as its main subject the entrapment of "manned" women in economically-motivated heterosexual/marital



relations.<sup>1</sup>

The third point needs some immediate elaboration before we plunge into textual analysis. Since marriage and other forms of heterosexual relations, traditionally predicated upon the exchange of female sexual and procreative power for male support are the mainstream institutions governing gender relations in a patriarchal society, the “cornering” of manless women in the American texts and the entrapment of manned women in the Chinese texts can be conceptualized as extra-structural and intra-structural confinement respectively. I attribute the extra-structural and intra-structural divergence between the American and Chinese writers to the different degrees to which an independent life was imaginable for American and Chinese women by the 1940s.

In the century leading up to the Second World War, the South had gone through

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that McCullers and Welty do not address the confinement of women within family and community. In “At the Landing,” Welty depicts a tyrannical old man who imprisons first his daughter and then his granddaughter in his castle-like house. In another story named after its female protagonist “Livvie,” marriage replaces generational hierarchy as the oppressive apparatus. The marriage of convenience between the title character—a lusty teenage girl—and an infirm, acquisitive old man parodically named Solomon leads to the confinement of Livvie in the circumference of the house and the stagnation of her life in perennial homemaking and nursing for the old man. Welty elucidates the economic rationale of the marriage by having Livvie repeat the word “nice” three times in her judgment of her new home and exhaustively cataloging Solomon’s possessions—a list that now includes Livvie (“Livvie” 228-9). Livvie’s incarceration in marriage is vividly symbolized by the “bottle trees” in front of the house that Solomon has painstakingly made “with his own hands over nine years” (229). These bottle trees keep Solomon’s house out of the way of harm and thus his rule intact by “luring [evil spirits] into the colored bottles, where they cannot get out again” (229). In her role as wife and care-taker, Livvie has to bottle up her own needs and desires, which seem “evil” to her, for the sake of her husband. However, unlike Zhang who does not envision extra-structural existence for women, Welty seems equally, if not more, interested in exploring the exile of transgressive women than the installation of obedient daughters and wives in the “safe” enclosures of family and community. Examples include Miss Eckhart, the mysterious stranger of “June Recital,” Sister, who declares her “freedom” from family by relocating herself behind the bars of the “P.O.,” Fay Chisom McKelva, who has tried to disown her Texas family in *The Optimist’s Daughter*, and Miss Clytie in “Clytie,” the last of which will be given detailed analysis in this chapter.

The preoccupation with the isolation of unconventional women figures is even more obvious in McCullers’s body of works. As Robert Phillips remarks, the work of McCullers is whole cloth, consistently exploring the same vision in her short stories as well as her novels and novellas (172). But Phillips is right for the wrong reason. The theme that McCullers has spun so many variations on is not so much the existential abstraction of spiritual isolation, as the author claims and Phillips concurs, as the concretized experience of ejection and exclusion of the queer and the freaks from the community. According to Rachel Adams, the freak and the queer point to all acts and desires that deviate from (including oppose to) normative behavior and social distinctions. The freak is distinguished from the queer only in terms of its literalization of queer tendencies on the body’s surface (552). One dominant category of the queer and the freaks in McCullers is the “incalculable” and “freakish,” because androgynous, women. From her first novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* to her most critically acclaimed work “Ballad,” from lengthy tales like *Member of the Wedding* to short stories such as “Like That,” McCullers returns again and again to the theme of the estrangement and isolation of women who resist markers of femininity and upset social equilibrium over the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity.

waves of industrialization and urbanization initiated first by the Yankees and then accelerated by the First World War. The Second World War, while adding to the industrialization of the South, also called men to the battlefield and left the factories to be filled by women. For women, working suddenly became a patriotic duty. Answering their nation's call to "get out and serve the country," the number of women in the work force increased from less than 14 million to 20 million from 1940 to 1945. By 1945, they constituted 38 percent of the work force. Not only did more women work, they also entered professions and trades that had been the exclusive domains of men. They worked in the naval yards, weapons factories, communication equipment lines (Giddings 235). Nevertheless, the exigencies of the war, rather than eliminating, only suspended traditional prescriptions of domesticity and the judgment of women who, by choice or circumstances, live outside traditional heterosexual marriage as wanton and contaminating waste. The pertinacity of old values is driven home by the reinforcement of traditional roles of women in the post-war-era. In this light, the stories of manless women (women without men) by Welty and McCullers represented by "Clytie" and "The Ballad of the Sad Café," written in 1940 and 1942 respectively, provide us with two perfectly-timed specimens to see the mounting tension between the increasingly visible (and eventually central, as in "Ballad of the Sad Café") existence of manless women and the patriarchal imperative to marginalize them out of the system into a carefully contained (non)existence.

Whereas independent adult women are a real, albeit tenuous, possibility in the American stories, they seem to be totally beyond Zhang's imagination. Although Shanghai

was China's biggest industrial city and women accounted for almost two-thirds of the total industrial workforce in Shanghai (Honig 1), they came from destitute peasant families outside the city and a great many entered factories as indentured workers.<sup>2</sup> As Kenneth Pomeranz notes in "Women's Work and the Economic of Respectability," an in-depth inquiry of the influence of women's paid labor on gender perceptions and family life in the late Qing and the early Republic, "Women might have gained some 'freedom' as their families were increasingly unable to afford a strictly gendered division of labor, but this freedom consisted mostly of greater exposure to an exploitative world" (239). Even the free laborers had little or no control over their income. As meager as their earnings were, they had to supplement their natal and marital families' subsistence living, which was more and more difficult to maintain against the backdrop of the general bankruptcy of the rural economy in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century China. As Pomeranz concludes, although contradictory accounts abound as to the effect of the increasing economic importance of women's employment outside the home on women's life, there is plenty of reason to doubt that this new economic dynamic enhanced women's autonomy (256).

If independence is unattainable for the poor peasant turned working woman, it is not always a desirable option for women from elite backgrounds. An unprecedented number of women, usually from rich merchant and official families, did become professional women and enjoyed a degree of economic independence. They worked predominantly as secretaries, but also as journalists, writers, professors, doctors, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> For details about the distribution of women laborers in various industries, their geographical origin, working conditions and pay levels, see "Chapter Five: Women in Industry, Transportation and Construction Part One" 第五篇 工业、交通、建设系统妇女 (一) (Diwupian gongye jiaotong jishe xitong funü yi ).

However, due to the rarity of women in public spaces, they were eroticized and sexualized in popular media and culture, frequently paired with concubines and prostitutes in the public imagination (Goodman 274-275). Because of the extreme exploitation and poverty associated with the female industrial workers and the disrepute of the women professionals, women continued to see marriage as the better if not the only means of gaining economic support. That heterosexual/marital union is the only “decent” “employment” for Chinese women, I argue, lies behind Zhang’s preoccupation with the snares inside the heterosexual/marriage economy.

### **Two Spinsters in Welty’s “Clytie” and McCullers’s “The Ballad of the Sad Café”**

As noted before, “Clytie” by Eudora Welty was written in 1940 at the very beginning of the absorption of large numbers of women into the industry. It mainly exemplifies the tenacious pull of traditional proscription of spinsterhood in the South as a powerless and peripheral existence.

The title character Clytie is one of the two spinster sisters of the Farris, the town’s old aristocracy. The once prominent family, who gives the town its name “Farris’s Gin,” now lives in a run-down house on the edge of the community and retains little contact with the outside world.

The isolated and dilapidated state of their family house may be read as a manifestation of the Farris’ loss of social and economic prestige in the community. However, its desolation is also emblematic of the peripheral and powerless status of the spinster in the small Southern town. A series of untoward happenings have depleted the

masculine energy of the Farr household. Clytie's father is confined to bed after a stroke, "paralyzed, blind," his speech reduced to bestial howling in "unintelligible sounds" (84). Her brother Gerald has been wrecked by a failed marriage. He occasionally comes downstairs dressed to go to work in the family's downtown store. But it is so easy for him to lose heart that he most likely ends up retreating to his room upstairs and drinking himself into an inert state not unlike his father. Another brother, for reasons unexplained, commits suicide. With no "functional" male member left in the family, the Farris become synonymous with its two daughters who are now hopelessly beyond marriageable age.

Wyatt-Brown observes that Southerners saw the spinster, manless and childless, as doubly cursed, and her life "a form of social death" (238). According to Mary Anne Ferguson, "a single woman who remains single in society is seen as queer, frequently thin and emaciated to symbolize her withdrawal from life" (8). Octavia, Clytie's sister and the primary spinster in the story, epitomizes every bit of Southern perceptions of unmarried woman. She is marginalized and secluded. She never comes out of the house; in fact she "never [comes] all the way downstairs for any reason" (83). She is half dead (semi-inanimate), her body fused with the house in a grotesque manner. When she stands "quite still," she looks like "one of the unmovable relics of the house" (82). Like the maiden, her body is closed. But while the maiden is in the process of becoming, waiting to be filled, Octavia the spinster's closedness is definitive. The airless house, whose windows are shut and shades are drawn, is a spatial representation of her body. Just as Octavia's body is perceived as un(re)productive and wasted, the house reeks of antiquity, decay, and

death. So far as it is in a symbiotic relationship with Octavia, the house concretizes the body and destiny of Octavia the spinster.

Octavia's staunch and almost extreme protestation of the inviolability of the outlying boundaries of the house can be read as a tenacious effort to preserve the closedness of her body, and thus fulfill the community's definition of the spinster as an unpenetrated and now impenetrable body. It is significant that Octavia directs her utmost antagonism towards a black figure—Old Lethy, the father's childhood nurse and the family cook, who was let go when the family could no longer afford her. When the black mammy comes back out of the country to see the father when she hears he is dying, Octavia shouts curses at her to turn her away like an intruder. Despite Old Lethy and their father's repeated appeals to be allowed to see each other, Octavia never lets her in. Octavia's unreasonable fear of encroachment and invasion from without, especially her black phobia, can only be construed as effects of the larger social scheme to instill a grave sense of vulnerability in the spinster, particularly in relation to the other race.

Roberts notes that manless, unregulated women pose a threat to the conventional order by virtue of their being on the edge. Manless white women became a threat more real in their co-existence with masterless blacks in the postbellum South. The preponderance of the two groups reflected the waning power of white male rule and posed a serious menace to the symbolic (social) order. Roberts then argues that to thwart any challenge white women and blacks might have made to the social strictures they were subject to, the South swiftly erected stories about black sexual atrocities and made these two powerless groups

out to be natural enemies (154). In this light, Octavia's disproportionate reaction to any "prying from without" in general and to the black mammy in particular is a displaced manifestation of the fear of rape the Southern society instills in the spinster.

Clytie, whom the town addresses as "Miss Clytie" and therefore perceives as just another spinster, is unlike her sister in many ways. She wanders regularly away from the family house, Octavia, and the confining spinsterhood they represent, on excursions into the center of the town. The narrator tells us what draws Clytie out on excursions into the center of the community is an incomprehensible obsession on her part with watching people's faces.

Anyone could have told you that there were no more than 150 people in Farr's Gin, "counting Negroes." Yet the number of faces seemed to Clytie almost infinite. . . . The first thing she discovered about a face was always that she had never seen it before. When she began to look at people's actual countenances there was no more familiarity in the world for her. (83)

The infinite difference and uniqueness Clytie perceives of the finite number of faces in town is a projection of her desire for a different and unique face of her own. By interrogating these faces, Clytie hopes to recover a vision she once had of a self she might become, which is prevented from materializing apparently by her family, especially her sister. "Their faces came between her face and another. It was their faces which had come pushing in between, long ago, to hide some face that had looked back at her. And now it was hard to remember the way it looked, or the time when she had seen it first" (85-86).

It is important to note that, since Octavia is, as we have argued, an embodiment of the Southern community's deep-seated beliefs about spinsterhood, what really blocks Clytie from a different identity than that of a spinster, one that participates in life rather

than is shunned and ostracized by life, is the patriarchal community's preconception of a woman who lives without a man. She must be demented or dead (socially if not physically) or deadly. When Clytie ventures from the abject space of her family house into the street, she is perceived as crazy ("Miss Clytie's wits were all leaving her"), finished (her old hat sagging in the rain "look[s] even more absurd and done for"), and a potential source of disturbance ("every Saturday they expected her to be run over, the way she darted out into the road with all the horses and trucks") (81-82).

The weird climax of "Clytie" drives home Clytie's incarceration by the larger community's particular view of spinsterhood. When the town barber, Mr. Bobo, the only inhabitant of the town allowed inside the Farrs' house, arrives to shave Mr. Farr, Clytie decides to reach out to touch the barber's face and through his face perhaps the world outside the imprisoning walls of the house. It is a touch of "breath-taking gentleness," but it horrifies Mr. Bobo and contorts his face into an expression of disgust and horror that Clytie can hardly bear. "[B]oth [utter] a despairing cry" before Mr. Bobo flees down the stairs and "Clytie pale as ghost, stumble[s] against the railing," sensing nothing but her sister's angry voice shouting down at her from above (89). Mr. Bobo's face and his flight confront Clytie with her madness and monstrosity in the eyes of the community, shattering her dream of a life outside the house, outside the spinster's body.

The tragic conclusion of the story relates Clytie's desperate but futile attempt to break her confinement by the community-defined image of spinsterhood. She sees a face in the rain barrel from which she is supposed to get the water necessary for her father's



shaving.

It was a wavering, inscrutable face. The brows were drawn together as if in pain. The eyes were large, intent, almost avid, the nose ugly and discolored as if from weeping, the mouth old and closed from any speech. On either side of the head dark hair hung down in a disreputable and wild fashion. Everything about the face frightened and shocked her with its signs of waiting, of suffering.

For the second time that morning, Clytie recoiled, and as she did so, the other recoiled in the same way.

Too late, she recognized the face. She stood there completely sick at heart, as though the poor, half-remembered vision had finally betrayed her.

“Clytie! Clytie! The water! The water!” came Octavia’s monumental voice.

Clytie did the only thing she could think of to do. She bent her angular body further, and thrust her head into the barrel, under the water, through its glittering surface into the kind, *featureless* depth, and held it there.

When the Old Lethy found her, she had fallen forward into the barrel, with her poor ladylike black-stockinged legs up-ended and hung apart like a pair of tongs. (90; my emphasis)

The reflection in the water parallels earlier perceptions of Clytie by the town—she is a distraught maniac with unruly hair and a worn-out look. This image is the second confirmation of her mad and repugnant spinsterhood—the first she sees in the face of Mr. Bobo. It destroys her inner vision of a self uncontained by the Southern stereotype. In what perhaps is her desperate attempt to beat down the denigrating image, Clytie pushes her head into the water, breaking its reflecting surface and holding her head in the “featureless” depth. But even death does not release her from the half ridiculing, half horrified gaze of the community. The last sentence, with its shocking objectifying metaphor, “upends” and mocks Clytie’s belief in her ability to move away from Octavia, from the house, and ultimately from what the society thinks she is.

“Clytie” dramatizes the incarcerating power of the society’s view of a manless woman. However hard she tries to create and maintain a view of herself as strong, mobile,

and desirable, her self-view is inevitably wrapped up, crowded out, and eventually drowned by the socially-constructed image of the spinster as pathetic, insane, and horrible. Like Clytie, Miss Amelia in “Ballad” refuses to be confined by the patriarchal delineation of spinsterhood. She carefully constructs her body and house as what they are not—paternal and masculine. But her resistance proves no more successful than that of Miss Clytie.

As mentioned before, Kahane suggests that the ultimate confinement in female Gothic is none other than the female body which is spatially represented as the house of maternal legacy. As much a town spinster as the Farr sisters (the town continues to address Amelia as *Miss Amelia* despite her marriage to Marvin Macy), Miss Amelia is everything but the ostracized and abjected spinster sisters in “Clytie.” In the beginning of the novella, Miss Amelia seems to have successfully (re)located herself outside the reach of femininity in general and the enclosure of spinsterhood in particular as mapped by the patriarchal, misogynist culture.

The house Amelia inhabits is literally and figuratively a paternal legacy. Inherited from her father, it is the “largest building” in the community and situated “in the very center of the town” (197). Its impressive size and prominent location bespeaks wealth and authority and are paralleled in Amelia’s towering physique (six feet tall with “bones and muscles like a man” 198) and her dominance in the communal economy and psychology. Motherless and brought up by her father, she is well-established in masculine authoritative roles. She is “the richest woman for miles around,” for she is the proprietor of a store and a

still (where she makes “the best liquor in the county”) and the possessor of “mortgages on crops and property, a saw mill [and] money in the bank” (199). She is also bellicose, never hesitating to engage the law, the epitome of the symbolic order, “over just a trifle” (199).

Amelia’s manly occupations—store-keeper, farmer, still owner, businesswoman, and banker—are materialized by the various compartments (components) of her premises. McCullers details the layout of Amelia’s house so meticulously that we can easily have a virtual tour inside her premises. Upon entering the building, one finds left to the door the store counter, and to the right an area filled with farm implements. Her still is three miles back in the swamps. The most concentrated spatial embodiment of her socio-economic prominence is “a little room” at the far right of the store, which “Miss Amelia call[s] her office” (208). The office is always “cheerfully” lighted and in great order. It is, the narrator notes with a tint of amusement, “a room well-known, in a dreadful way, throughout the country” (208). It is here that she calculates all business transactions, types out documents, and files thousands of papers according to the alphabet, all of which presumably revolve around making money out of people.

Despite her masculine facade and executions, i.e., freedom from the confinement that is femininity, the narrator makes clear that the town has never forgotten Miss Amelia is just a woman, one who is yet to become “calculable,” i.e., be brought around one way or another to a destiny that behooves her female body: wife, mother, or spinster (219). Since the hope for her to be rehabilitated through marriage has failed, Miss Amelia is decidedly on her way to spinsterhood. But her central position in the community’s life renders her an

ideologically threatening oxymoron: a powerful spinster. As she is approaching thirty, the age that officiates a woman's spinsterhood in the South (Roberts 147), the incongruence between her dominance and manlessness sharpens.

It is at this critical juncture that the hunchback appears on Miss Amelia's porch and claims to be her kin. Despite Amelia's well-documented anti-social personality,<sup>3</sup> she takes in the hunchback, addresses him endearingly as Cousin Lymon and develops a mystifying relationship with him that has drawn quite a lot of critical attention. Gilbert and Gubar think it is simply a natural development after her rejection of the manly and macho Marvin Macy. Amelia "has arrogantly supposed that she could live in a no man's land—first without a real man, and then with a dwarfish no-man" ("Fighting for Life" 148). Her infatuation with Lymon stems from "penis envy." "She wants a member instead of a wedding," even if it is only a false (baby) phallus (150). Westlings's reading is less psychoanalytic but suggests a similar reliance on Amelia's part on Lymon to "complete" and sustain her masculine identity. "There is actually a revision of traditional roles of male and female. Miss Amelia is physically dominant and provides a living for the household as a husband would. Cousin Lymon is the pampered mate who struts about in finery, is finicky about food and accommodations, and gads about town socializing and gossiping,' presumably the 'wife' role" ("Carson" 470).

Such readings, I contend, ignore the fact that after Cousin Lymon becomes part of Miss Amelia's life she becomes more feminine even as she is more masculine in action.

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<sup>3</sup> Amelia claims kin to no one; her great aunt is now dead, and she and her only relative that is alive—a double first cousin—are downright hostile to each other. "She ate her Sunday dinners by herself; her place was never crowded with a flock of relatives" (201).

She begins to wear a red dress every Saturday and upon the appeals of the hunchback turns the inhospitable space of the store into a warm place of communal association and entertainment. Whereas she guards her body and her house with the utmost vigilance before Lymon's arrival, she is now offering the house (and symbolically her body) as a site for connection and pleasure.

I suggest then that Amelia's sudden change of heart be alternatively explained in her effort to head off the mounting pressure for her to be the abject town spinster. McCullers stresses that the year Miss Amelia takes in the hunchback she is thirty, which is, as we have noted, exactly the threshold age for an old maid. In a society where women need to have a man's name to participate in life, to reach thirty and remain single threatens Miss Amelia with marginalization and oblivion. This, I argue, lies behind Amelia's voluntary alignment with Cousin Lymon. Since Lymon, as Gilbert and Gubar rightly point out, fills up the presupposed "vacancies" in her life ("Fighting for Life" 150), Miss Amelia's disenfranchising manlessness and childlessness are temporarily removed. As a result, Miss Amelia becomes a powerful matriarch—the only legitimate androgynous existence in the Southern culture—of the community rather than the helpless and hapless spinster.

That Lymon's appearance in Miss Amelia's life wards off the mounting enmity the town harbors towards her is brilliantly dramatized in his first encounter with the townsmen after the night of his arrival. Hardly one day passes since he was taken into the house by Miss Amelia when the town starts weaving the wildest pretext to topple Miss Amelia's

“illegitimate” dominance of the town. The rumor is so “terrible” that “the town and the country around it [are] stunned by it” (205). Ironically, the excuse—Amelia has murdered the hunchback for something in his suitcase—betrays the town’s own fixation with economic gains. As night approaches, psychological tension builds up. By eight o’clock, a sinister gang of about eight to ten men convenes on the porch of Amelia’s store.

They were silent . . . . They themselves did not know what they were waiting for, but it was this: in times of tension, when some great action is pending, men gather and wait in this way. And after a time there will come a moment when all together they will act in unison, not from thought or from the will of any one man, but as though their instincts had merged together so that the decision belongs to no single one of them, but to the group as a whole. At such a time no individual hesitates. And whether the matter will be settled peaceably, or whether joint action will result in ransacking, violence, and crime, depends on destiny. So the men waited soberly on the porch of Miss Amelia’s store, not one of them realizing what they would do, but knowing inwardly they must wait, and that the time had almost come. (207)

Paulson accurately assesses the murderous intentions of the gang, calling it a “lynch mob” (190). Nameless at first mention and acting “as though their instincts had merged together,” the gang members present an undifferentiated monolithic façade that evokes the collective unconscious of the white South against the “black rapist.” However, the sinister delegation’s similarity to the lynch mob goes deeper than its self-representation as a group of whites united by an urge to revenge (more imagined than real) violence through violence. Like a lynch mob, its motivation for “ransacking, violence, and crime” goes far beyond the particular pretext for action. Just as the alleged rape of white women is frequently the white man’s pretext to terrorize “overstepping” blacks, immigrants, and other minorities, and to keep them in their “place,”<sup>4</sup> the rumor of Amelia’s crime is only a

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<sup>4</sup> As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall points out in *Revolt Against Chivalry*, mob violence in the South is underlain by socio-economic objectives: to run off individual blacks who would otherwise eat into the upcoming harvest or who, by

trigger for the detonation of the town's pent-up animosity towards a single woman who dominates the community's socio-economic life. The economic motivation of the town's vigilante justice is belied by the sadistic festivity it displays in anticipation of Amelia's downfall. The narrator tells us the community revels in not only repeating and building up the details of Miss Amelia's horrid crime and her equally heart-stopping punishment but also squabbling over "what would happen to her property" (206). "One or two mortals, who were in debt to Miss Amelia, even put on Sunday clothes as though it were a holiday" (ibid.).

Miss Amelia, as the narrator tells us, remains strangely unaware of the menacing festivities around her. Even after she notices the gang on her porch, she remains placidly sitting in her office.

On this evening Miss Amelia wrote with her fountain pen a good deal. But even so she could not be forever unaware of the group waiting out there on the dark porch, and watching her. From time to time she looked up and regarded them steadily. But she did not holler out to them to demand why they were loafing around her property like a sorry bunch of gabbies. Her face was proud and stern, as it always was when she sat at the desk of her office. After a time their peering in like that seemed to annoy her. She wiped her cheek with a red handkerchief, got up, and closed the office door.

Now to the group on the porch this gesture acted like a signal. The time had come. . . . All at once, as though moved by one will, they walked into the store. At that moment the eight men looked very much alike—all wearing blue overalls, most of them with whitish hair, all pale of face, and all with a set, dreaming look in the eye. What they would have done next no one knows. But at that instant there was a noise at the head of the staircase. The men looked up and then stood dumb with shock. It was the hunchback, whom they had already murdered in their minds. Also, the creature was not at all as had been pictured to them—not a pitiful and dirty little chatterer, alone and beggared in this world. Indeed, he

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virtue of having successfully gaining an economic foothold, became an intolerable threat to the rigidly-defined racial lines. Furthermore, it is an intimidation strategy against the *whole* black community: it strikes horror and indoctrinates inferiority into the heart of all its members and thus perpetuate southern racial inequality (141-9). According to Bederman, other minorities, Asians, recent immigrants, were also subject to the violence of lynch mobs at the pressure points of American history (12-14). Therefore it is safe to say that lynching is a primary instrument for the dominant group, white male southerners, to keep all monoritized segments of the society underfoot.

was like nothing any man among them had ever beheld until that time. The room was still as death.

The hunchback came down slowly with the proudness of one who *owns* every plank of the floor beneath his feet. In the past days he had greatly changed. For one thing he was clean beyond words. He still wore his little coat, but it was brushed off and neatly mended. Beneath this was a fresh red and black checkered shirt belonging to Miss Amelia. He did not wear trousers such as ordinary men are meant to wear, but a pair of tight-fitting little knee-length breeches. On his skinny legs he wore black stockings, and his shoes were of a special kind, being queerly shaped, laced up over the ankles, and newly cleansed and polished with wax. Around his neck ... he wore a shawl of lime-green wool, the fringes of which almost touched the floor. (209; my emphasis)

Miss Amelia holds her ground, wielding a phallic symbol and engaged in the traditional masculine privilege of writing. Her steady regard is suggestive of the look of a combatant sizing his enemy up. But knowing the root of their antagonism, she is going to leave them to her best weapon. After flashing the provocative red handkerchief to signal the beginning of the fight, she closes her door to put herself outside the imminent battle. No sooner has the gang invaded Miss Amelia's house than they are stopped in their destructive track by the sight of the hunchback on the stairs. The hunchback, no more a "pitiful and dirty" little beggar, is now dressed in layers of expensive fabric and leather, and claims ownership of the ground he stands on. As deformed and queer-looking as he may be, he qualifies as a masculine presence in the mind of the town, who associates power with anatomy. As such, he single-handedly stems the murderous intention of the gang and brings about "an air of intimacy" (210).

It is highly significant that Lymon, the embodiment of Miss Amelia's "manfulness," brings about her downfall through breaking his liaison with Miss Amelia to ally with Marvin Macy. As Caroline Carvill notes, in the brutal wrestling scene nearing the end of the story, "Miss Amelia wins the battle of strength, pinning Marvin down; she loses



the war, however, when Cousin Lymon—the very thing she’s fighting for—intercedes on Marvin’s behalf” (38). Lymon’s intercession is decisive in the fight for power, because his change of allegiance effectively strips Miss Amelia of the male protection she pretends to access. Without Lymon, she is reduced to a defenseless old spinster vulnerable to violence and ostracization.

The seemingly wanton vandalism Lymon and Macy enact upon her property is not a capricious act of revenge but a necessary step to topple Miss Amelia’s economic prominence and to reduce her to what she is—a powerless spinster. In this light, it is only fitting that, Lymon, now the epitome of Miss Amelia’s “manlessness,” should be the one who participates in and even leads the destructive process.<sup>5</sup> McCullers meticulously catalogues the devastation he and Marvin Macy wreak.

They unlocked the private cabinet of curios and took everything in it.

They broke the mechanical piano.

They carved terrible words on the café tables.

They found the watch that opened in the back to show a picture of a waterfall and took that also.

They poured a gallon of sorghum syrup all over the kitchen floor and smashed the jars of preserves.

They went out in the swamp and completely wrecked the still, ruining the big new condenser and the cooler, and setting fire to the shack itself.

They fixed a dish of Miss Amelia’s favorite food, grits with sausage, seasoned it with enough poison to kill off the county, and placed this dish temptingly on the café counter.

They did everything ruinous they could think of without actually breaking into the office where Miss Amelia stayed the night. Then they went off together, the two of them.

(251)

The demolition the two perform on Miss Amelia’s property can be readily read as the eventual play-out of the mob violence Miss Amelia ducked six years before.

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<sup>5</sup> Lymon must be the primary perpetrator of Amelia’s spiritual, physical and economic devastation, because he is the one with whom Amelia has entrusted the whereabouts of her valuable possessions and deeply personal cherishables.

After this catastrophe, Miss Amelia succumbs to the community's definition of a manless woman. She locks herself up in her house, which has shed its look of warmth and importance. It is now "boarded up completely and lean[s] so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any time" (198). Its look of desertedness is a poignant manifestation of Miss Amelia's desolation as eventually the town spinster.

In a word, the story can be read as a long losing battle of Miss Amelia to prevent herself from being thrown by the community (back) into the confining body of femininity in general and that of the spinster in particular. The paternal house and masculine body Miss Amelia constructs for herself to displace her maternal legacy and feminine body are viciously and violently attacked, broken into, and demolished, in Gilbert and Gubar's words, "the defeat that is femininity" ("Fighting for Life" 148).

### **Man-bound Women in Zhang's Stories**

In contrast to Welty and McCullers, Zhang Ailing writes of no manless women. Except for a couple of exceptions (Liusu briefly seeks to live forever as a divorcee but succumbs to family pressure and finds herself another husband; Jiang Weilong in "Aloewood Incense: The First Brazier" originally plans to make a living by herself but pursues it only briefly), her heroines hardly ever entertain the idea of a life without man. As mentioned in Chapter Two, most young girls in Zhang Ailing's fiction are the marriage-craving type. They wait in anxious limbo for marriage, without which life does not begin and death is imminent (as in the case of Chuanchang in "A Withered Flower"). In other words, unlike the American stories, Zhang's fictional world does not furnish a space

for definitively manless heroines. While confinement in the American stories is mainly presented as a result of social ostracization of women who blatantly resist the patriarchal imperative of heterosexual relations, in Zhang's fiction it takes the form of women's entrapment in economically-driven heterosexual (including marital) relationships.

"Interlocking Chains" 连环套 (Lianhuantao) best conveys Zhang's understanding of the business-transaction nature of heterosexual relations.<sup>6</sup> The protagonist of the story, Nixi, lives in three quasi-marriage arrangements at different stages of her life. She is first sold by her foster-mother at the age of fourteen to an Indian merchant, Ya Heya, who owns a medium-sized textile shop. Twelve years and two children later, the couple has a violent falling out and Nixi is thrown out of the house. Then she is taken in as a concubine by Dou Yaofang, an old Chinese man who owns a prosperous medicine shop. Five years and another two children later, the old man dies and she is forced to leave with her four children. Not long afterwards, she becomes the lover of a British engineer, Mr. Thomason, and gives birth to a girl.

In all these relationships, Nixi trades her sexuality for financial gains. It is significant that Zhang Ailing titles the story "Interlocking Chains": the change of partner does not change the economic motivation behind her relation to men. In a world where economic resources are exclusively controlled by men, a woman like Nixi is inevitably trapped in an expedient view and use of heterosexual relationships as food vouchers.

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<sup>6</sup> "Interlocking Chains" was serialized in a Shanghai literary magazine *Wanxiang* 万象 (Jan.-June 1944). Zhang did not finish the novella and did not include it in her 1946 expanded edition of *Chuanqi*. However, in her preface to the new edition, she insinuates that she did *consider* "Interlocking Chains" for inclusion and only gave it up after an aborted attempt to revise it ("A Few Words to Say to My Readers" 460).

Although in two of the three quasi-marriages mentioned above, the exchange of her body for economic security does not lead to sexual deprivation (both Ya Heya and Mr. Thomason are passionate lovers), Zhang Ailing explains that the primary objective of her union with these men is always financial security. “Ya Heya is a rugged and lusty man. . . . He should be the ideal lover for a middle-aged rich Mrs. But what Nixi the fourteen year old needs is not passion but a little pocket money and a little self-esteem” (“Interlocking” 9).<sup>7</sup> Nixi seduces Mr. Thomson for the same reason she lived with the superannuated medicine shop owner—to pull herself out of poverty. No sooner than her relationship with Mr. Thomson is established than she urges him to buy her a house. In the following paragraph, Zhang tirelessly enumerates the myriad of *things* Nixi garners in return for surrendering the ownership and control of her body.

Nixi’s world is suddenly rich and crowded, things tripping her up and things bumping into her. Sandal wood and teak wood western-style round tables, the legs of which end in ball-holding claws; a huge dining table that comes with a whole set of twelve chairs, all carved with “western clouds,” roses and the curling tendrils of the ivy, and studded with brass nails in the center of the back. There is also a red velvet sofa. The blurry rose patterns and “western clouds” are peeping out of its dark fabric. Its arms are in white lace covers. Jacquard curtains hang right next to lace draperies. The dressing table is covered with crochet lace and tied in a pink pleated dress. Even lamps and the phone wear red gauze dresses shaped like lotus leaves. On the top of the five-drawer chest sits a silver plate. The items it holds are purely ornamental: a super-size mouth-rinsing mug, a silver powder jar, a silver-handled mirror, and silver water jugs of different sizes. The floor is covered by Beijing-brand carpet, an exclusive luxury woven for foreigners. There are even antiques—the kind made exclusively for foreigners. Against the corners stand the fragrant sandal wood chests with flower carvings. (63)

Many critics have noted Zhang’s fascination with “frivolous” details such as we see in the paragraph cited above. For instance, Rey Chow views the detail in Chinese modern

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<sup>7</sup> Translations from “Interlocking Chains” are mine.

writers including Zhang Ailing, as a subversive strategy, i.e., a metaphor for distractions or digressions from the hegemonic vision (narrative) of the deterministic marching of history towards modernity, with a monolithic national identity implied. She argues that the detail which is associated with “the prosaic, the mundane, and the ornamental per se” is also associated with femininity which these realms traditionally connote. Because the feminine details are “signs” of the decadent Chinese tradition, signs of a proclaimed “past” (87), they are rendered invisible (being subsumed under a unifying modern consciousness) or simply dismissed according to the imperative of modern narrative. But Zhang, making the outdated and defamed detail the “very stuff” of her writing (117), deflates the illusion of a modern identity that the “new nation” demands and suggests the persistent hold of “the fetters of feudal China” (120).<sup>8</sup>

Although Chow seems to have ignored that fact that the feminine details in Zhang evoke modern/western as well as Chinese/traditional styles of clothing and upholstery, her association of Zhang’s details with signs of restrictive traditional mores and practices is especially relevant to my study. I suggest, while Zhang’s details of women’s decorated bodies and surroundings, Chinese or Western-oriented, evoke a feudal view of women as analogous to the insubstantial and ornamental, the details of their clothing, jewels, and luxuriously furnished rooms, can also be understood as physical evidence of the adamant persistence of the old economically-driven heterosexual/marital relationships in the

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<sup>8</sup> I am fully aware that “detail” as defined by Chow has a much broader scope than the material bits and pieces that comprise women’s world. Besides irrelevant details of fashion and interior decoration, it includes figures and ideologies, historical or fictional, which are incongruent with the dominant view of history and thus marginalized or dismissed altogether in literary/cultural narratives. Chow’s analysis of “The Golden Cangue” focuses on Zhang’s foregrounding an outdated figure of Cao Qiqiao, positing her as emblematic of a supposedly “bygone” era and its backward practices and mind-sets. I suggest it is equally productive to read Zhang’s detail as the *material* details of women’s life.

modernizing nation.

In Zhang's fiction, precious ornaments, beautiful clothes, and household paraphernalia function as a crucial emblem of the economic nature of heterosexual/marital relations. In "The Golden Cangue," Qiqiao, who has traded her sexual and procreative powers for a comfortable life, always appears in elaborate jewelry and expensive attire. Her bedroom is screened off from view by a "stack of gold-lacquered trunks right inside the door," which we later learn contain golden ornaments of all kinds. In "Aloewood Incense," Weilong, a high school girl dreaming of economic independence through hard work, gradually succumbs to the will of her aunt Madame Liang for her to be a sexual pawn in the latter's romantic schemes. The first bait that she swallows is none other than a closet-full of garments Madame Liang prepares for her.

It is important to note that while all the material possessions concretize the lure or reward of imprisonment in heterosexual/marital relationships, they are also the very components of the oppressive and hostile space in which Zhang's heroines inevitably find themselves incarcerated and punished. In "The Golden Cangue," the solid gold pendants of the earrings Qiqiao wears are compared to brass nails that nail her down like a butterfly specimen in a glass box. In "Aloewood Incense," Situ Xie, an elderly sex predator puts a diamond bracelet around Weilong's wrist "faster even than a detective whips out the handcuffs and claps them onto a criminal" (49). Biluo in "Jasmine Tea" 茉莉香片 (Moli xiangpian) a submissive daughter from an aristocratic family, who is forced into an unhappy but economically advantageous marriage, is compared to "a bird embroidered

onto a screen—a white bird in clouds of gold stitched onto a screen of melancholy purple satin. The years passed; the bird’s feathers darkened, mildewed, and were eaten by moths, but the bird stayed on the screen even in death” (92). The expensive satin is symbolic of the wealth Biluo is married into, but “stitched” down, she has forsaken the right to flight. The fate that awaits her is a gloomy one of decay and death.

The macabre contrast between the pomp of elaborate adornments and the stark reality of incarceration and decay is best illustrated by a wedding scene in “Great Felicity.” Mrs. Lou recalls the wedding ceremonies that she saw as a child.

The bridal palanquin and the bands, striking up their relentless and barbaric pipe and gong music, muffling the weeping of the bride. The sound of drums and gongs made the heart quake. In the heat of the noonday sun, colorful tassels from the palanquin—a row of light green, a row of pink, a row of deep red—row upon row rippled in the wind like waves—making your head spin and then bringing the clarity of the noonday sun, like the strong yellow wine one drinks at Dragon Boat Festival. A palanquin bearer’s patched short blue trousers showed beneath his embroidered jacket. From above the jacket stuck out his skinny, yellow neck, shiny with sweat, like a maggot squirming out of a jar. The palanquin bearers and the band marched in rows, swaggering extravagantly in the procession. Everybody was caught up in an immense sense of joy outside themselves that left them reeling. (57)

The description of the wedding, with its gaudy decorations and blasting music, creates a dizzying aural and visual congestion. The space of the wedding procession transforms into a transparent but air-tight enclosure whose function is as much suppression as celebration. The bride’s weeping is muffled by the heartless glee of drums and goons while the extravaganza of color and fabric hides the decay, indexed by the bearer’s “patched” shorts, underneath. Furthermore, one startling detail embedded in the pomp of the elaborate details of the wedding procession gives a glimpse of the nightmarish truth of marriage. As Chen Ya-shu notes, comparing the “skinny, yellow neck” of the palanquin

bearer to “a maggot squiring out of a jar,” Zhang compels the reader to speculate on the clothed palanquin bearer as a rotting body and the whole procession a regiment of walking corpses (171). The wedding therefore turns into an abduction of a woman to carry her into the underworld. Marriage becomes an interment, a live burial.

What is buried is, as we discussed before, women’s body as a self-determining entity. In exchange for material support, she pledges to put in prison her personal preferences and yearnings. Just as the pomp of the wedding ceremony muffles her cry and constitutes the physical barrier that cuts her off from the world, the trappings of a wealthy life, especially her finery and luxurious surroundings, simultaneously 1) cover up her inner agonies, 2) index her imprisonment 3) constitute the very barrier, physical and psychological, that thwarts efforts to break out. Among all of Zhang’s novellas and short stories, “The Golden Cangue” gives the most memorable illustration of the firmness and tenacity of the trap.

Qiqiao (Ch’i-ch’iao)’s marriage to the invalid Second Master secures for her a comfortable life but locks up her erotic desire. In an effort to break out her cell of forced celibacy, Qiqiao plays the role of a seductress in front of the Third Master Jize (Chi-tse). Arguing she has been victimized by her arranged marriage, she tries to appeal to Jize for sympathy and comfort.

Ch’i-ch’iao stood up stiffly, holding on to the table with both hands, her eyelids down and the lower half of her face quivering as if she held scalding hot melted candlewax in her mouth. She forced out two sentences in a small high voice, “Go sit next to your Second Brother. Go sit next to your Second Brother.” She tried to sit beside Chi-tse and only got onto a corner of his chair and put her hand on his leg. “Have you touched his flesh? It’s soft and heavy, feels like your feet when they get numb ...”



Chi-tse had changed color too. Still he gave a frivolous little laugh and bent down to pinch her foot. "Let's see if they are numb."

"Heavens, you've never touched him, you don't know how good it is not to be sick ... how good ..." She slid down from the chair and squatted on the floor, weeping *inaudibly* with her face pillowed on her sleeve; the diamond on her hairpin flashed as it jerked back and forth. Against the diamond's flame shone the solid knot of pink silk thread binding a little bunch of hair at the heart of the bun. Her back convulsed as it sank lower and lower. She seemed to be not so much weeping as vomiting, churning and pumping out her bowels. ("Golden" 185-6; my emphasis)

Qiqiao's lines in this scene illustrate her obsession with the contrast between the healthy and the infirm, the romantic and the sordid, the sensual and the senseless, which belies her inkling that her healthy body, buried alive with the invalid, is reduced to the latter in the eyes of the society. In contrast, her quivering face, holding "scalding hot melted candlewax in her mouth," along with her seductive hand on Chi-Tse's leg, are shot through with life and desire, which amounts to a protest of the forced annulment of her senses and feelings. But as frantic and dramatic as her entreat is, the narrative emphasizes the silence of the scene. The aural hysteria is displaced, or rather erased, by Zhang's description of Qiqiao's flashing jewelry and her incongruently orderly hair. The flickering flame of the diamond indexes the sale of her body (and thus her desire) into captivity. Her tightly done hair, traditionally a sign of feminine decorum, signifies the heavy discipline and policing her body is subject to. The "solid knot of pink silk thread binding a little bunch of hair at the heart of bun" constructs an ambivalent imagery of invitation for amorous attention and imposition of harsh frigidity. Just as the weeping of the bride in "Great Felicity" is drowned by the heartless glee of drums and goons as well as the swaggering extravaganza of the procession, Qiqiao's entreatment for (com)passion is obstructed by all these signs of bondage.

Qiqiao's imprisonment is attributable to her mercenary marriage. Her body is confined with her lifeless husband and put under constant surveillance under his family, especially Old Mrs. Jiang, the mother-in-law. However, her incarceration does not end with the death of her fellow inmate and the prison guard. The following quote portends her continued imprisonment in the golden cangue.

Last year she wore mourning for her husband and this year her mother-in-law had passed away. Now her husband's uncle, Ninth Old Master, was formally invited to come and divide the property among the survivors. Today was the focal point of all her imaginings since she had married into the house of Chiang. *All these years she had worn the golden cangue but never even got to gnaw at the edge of the gold. It would be different from now on.* In her white lacquered silk blouse and black skirt she looked rouged, from the eyes rubbed red to the feverish cheekbones. She lifted her hand to touch her face. It was flushed but the rest of her body was so cold she was actually trembling. ("Golden" 194; my emphasis)

Now that the people who claim control over her body are dead, Qiqiao should be free to pursue the romantic/sexual love that her body has been deprived of. But the focal point of her imagining for the future is not physical and mental liberation but material wealth, epitomized by gold, which is the "rightful" reward for the years of imprisonment of her physical body. It is significant that Zhang weaves the instrument of confinement and the symbol of economic power into the single image of the golden cangue. The ambivalent image bespeaks Zhang's understanding of the beguiling desirability of women's confinement: gold and cangue are two sides of the same incarcerating space women are subject to. As Tsai Hsiu-Chuang notes in her dissertation "Domestic Space in Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang [Zhang Ailing]," "In spite of the gold-lacquered surface which enhances its value, a cangue is still a cangue that imprisons and punishes its victim" (209). Although the golden cangue evokes simultaneous empowerment and debilitating

restriction, Qiqiao is (or chooses to be) blind to its function as an incarcerating device. If she is thrown into the confinement of marriage, this time she stays in the cage though it is unlocked. Having internalized the binary opposition of freedom and wealth inherent in the logic of her marriage, Qiqiao perpetuates her own imprisonment despite the disappearance of the warden.

A few months after she gets her share of inheritance and moves into a new house with her son and daughter, Jize, onto whom Qiqiao has projected her frustrated desire and romantic longing, comes for a visit. After the usual pleasantries, the two get intimate and start a sexually-charged repartee. Qiqiao plays a coquette, one minute threatening to hit Jize with her fan and the next giggling with great mirth and pleasure. Jize goes into a confession of his love for Qiqiao, attributing his licentiousness to his suppressed yearning. His words send Qiqiao into a blissful reverie.

Ch'i-ch'iao bowed her head, basking in glory, in the soft music of his voice and the delicate pleasure of this occasion. So many years now, she had been playing hide-and-seek with him and never could get close, and there had still been a day like this in store for her. True, half a lifetime had gone by—the flower-years of her youth. Life is so devious and unreasonable. Why had she married into the Chiang family? For money? No, for meeting Chi-tse, because it was fated that she should be in love with him. (201)

However, Qiqiao immediately suspects Jize is lying: he is really after her money. Although she has a mind to let him act the lover before exposing him, she is also fully aware of the great risk she runs to indulge in the potential affair: “The Chiangs [are] very shrewd; she [may] not be able to keep her money” (202). As she makes up her mind she sits down to question Jize about the management of his property. It turns out Jize did come with an ulterior motive; he is here to persuade her to sell her land. Since Jize gives tidy and

well-prepared answers as to who will possibly buy her land at such short notice, Qiqiao has no doubt that he has all along schemed the transaction and planned to swallow the proceeds. Enraged that Jize is trying to cheat her out of her money, she explodes in a fit of violence. She flings her fan at Jize, which upsets the drink on the table and drenches Jize's silk gown. Exposed but contemptuous, Jize does not go out of the door until he thrusts one last insult at Qiqiao, suggesting she is a demented wretch. After Jize goes away, Qiqiao falls into a daze.

Ch'i-ch'iao stood there, supporting her head with a hand. In another second she had turned around and was hurrying upstairs. Lifting her skirt, she half climbed and half stumbled her way up, continually bumping against the dingy wall of green plaster. Her Buddha-blue jacket was smudged with patches of pale chalk. She wanted another glimpse of him from the upstairs window. No matter what, she had loved him before. Her love had given her endless pain. Just this alone should make him worthy of her continuing regard. How many times had she strained to suppress herself until all her muscles and bones and gums ached with sharp pain. Today it had all been her fault. It wasn't as if she did not know he was no good. If she wanted him she had to pretend ignorance and put up with his badness. Why had she exposed him? Isn't life just like this and no more than this? In the end what is real and what is false?

She reached the window and pulled aside the dark green foreign-style curtains fringed with little velvet balls. Jize was just going out the alley, his gown slung over his arm. Like a flock of white pigeons, the wind on that sunny day fluttered inside her white silk blouse and trousers. It penetrated everywhere, flapping its wings. (204-5)

The paragraphs cited above effectively establish a list of contrasts: dark and light, still and mobile, earth-bound and aerial. Inside her house, Qiqiao goes into a draped upstairs room that is described later in the novella as a place "where is no light" (232). It is a spatially inverted grave where Qiqiao voluntarily retreats. In contrast, Jize is going out of the alley into broad sun light. Unlike Qiqiao, who stands still at the window, weighed down by her jumbled thoughts and the complex design of her curtain, Jize's movement is light and free, lifted like a balloon by the wind, which flutters inside his blouse and

trousers like “a flock of white pigeons.” The image of Qiqiao peeping out of her window to look at the world she has renounced readily calls into mind the opening scene of “The Ballad of the Sad Café” in which Amelia looks out the window of her boarded-up house at the town that has expelled her. Both are deprived of light and movement by a claustrophobic enclosure. Both express intense mourning and grief for a bygone dream of love.

It is hard to understand Qiqiao’s obstinate longing, given that she has deliberately exposed him and is in return gravely humiliated. I suggest that we understand Jize as not simply *a* man but as a stand-in for all the men Qiqiao could have but did not, an avatar for Qiqiao’s erotic/sexual need. To reject him, it follows, is to deny herself freedom and the right to love. Although Qiqiao has moved triumphantly from her former grave, which she shares with her “alive-dead” husband, she erects a new one for herself, locking out the opportunity to rehabilitate her deformed sexuality. All this, for fear of losing the gold of her golden cangue.

Imprisonment in the golden cangue does not stop with Qiqiao. In the rest of the story, Qiqiao becomes a human agent of the trade of freedom for security that the golden cangue signifies. She transfers her imprisonment in abundance to the next generation, especially her daughter-in-law Zhishou (Chih-shou).

Only a few days into her marriage with Changbai (Ch’ang-pai), Zhishou finds herself caught in a perverted tangle of family relations. Several nights in a row, her mother-in-law, Qiqiao, holds Changbai in her room to entertain her with the most private details of

his married life. She has also used what she has heard to shame Zhishou's mother. Qiqiao has inflicted great psychological pain on Zhishou, but the latter cannot show any trace of it lest she will be ridiculed further.

Ch'i-ch'iao made Ch'ang-pai cook opium for her for two nights running. Chih-shou lay stiffly in bed with both hands on her ribs curled upward like a dead chicken's claws. She knew her mother-in-law was questioning her husband again, although heaven knew how he could have anything fresh to say. . . . Chih-shou suddenly sat up and parted the bed curtains with the sound of a bucket of water crashing down. This was an insane world, a husband not like a husband, a mother-in-law not like a mother-in-law. Either they were mad or she was. The moon tonight was better than ever, high and full like a white sun in a pitch-black sky, not a cloud within ten thousand li. Blue shadows all over the floor and blue shadows on the canopy overhead. Her feet, too, were in the deathly still blue shadows.

Thinking to hook up the bed curtains, Chih-shou reached out groping for the hook. With one hand holding on to the brass hook and her face snuggled against her shoulder, she could not keep the sobs from starting. The curtain dropped by itself. There was nobody but her inside the dark bed, still she hastened to hook the curtains up in a panic. Outside the windows there was still that abnormal moon that made one's body hairs stand on end all over—small white sun brilliant in the black sky. Inside the room she could clearly see the embroidered rosy-purple chair covers and table cloths, the gold-embroidered scarlet screen with five phoenixes flying in a row. The pink satin scrolls embroidered with seal-script characters embellished with flowers. On the dressing table the silver powder jar, silver mouth-rinsing mug, and silver vase were each caught in a red and green net and filled with wedding candies. Along the silk panel across the lintel of the bed hung balls of flowers, toy flower pots, *ju-yi*, and rice dumplings, all made of multi-colored gilded velvet, and dangling underneath them glass balls the size of finger tips and mauvish pink tassels a foot long. In such a big room crammed full of trunks, spare bedding, and furnishings, surely she could find a sash to hang herself with. She fell back on the bed. In the moonlight her feet had no color of life at all—bluish, greenish, purplish, the tints of a corpse gone cold. She wanted to die, she wanted to die. She was afraid of the moonlight but dared not turn on the light. Tomorrow her mother-in-law would say, "Master Pai fixed me a couple more pipes and our poor young mistress couldn't sleep the whole night, kept her light on to all hours waiting for him to come back—can't do without him." Chih-shou's tears flowed along the pillow. She did not wipe her eyes with a handkerchief; rubbing would get them swollen and her mother-in-law would again say, "Master Pai didn't sleep in his room for just one night and Young Mistress cried until her eyes were like peaches." ("Golden" 216-7)

Tsai in her dissertation notes that Zhang's use of the moonlight as an instrument of fear, a catalyst of insanity, a harbinger of death, and an intruder of the private space, allies

her work with Gothic fictions such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe (220-221). She argues that moonlight is an embodiment of Qiqiao’s pathological prying and dogged curiosity (221-2). I suggest that the moonlight, which resembles “a small white sun brilliant in the black sky,” can also be read as the scolding/exposing light from the panoptic tower Qiqiao occupies as the jailer. In the Foucauldian model, the individuals in the cell are constantly confronted by the panoptic tower. The observed cannot, however, see when there is a person in the tower; he must believe that he could be watched at any moment: “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (Foucault 201). Qiqiao’s power to instill fear and deter any sign of discontent lies precisely in her simultaneous invisibility and presupposed omniscience. Her constant and oppressive surveillance turns the bridal chamber into a prison like the Panopticon of Foucault.

The joyful colors, expensive fabrics and valuable furnishings Zhishou sees around her are typical of a wedding chamber. They suggest a rich, happy and comfortable married life. The flowers and rice-dumplings in particular are symbols of fruitfulness and fecundity. But as Zhishou discovers, the reality of marriage is a far cry from this polychromatic and auspicious façade. The room of conjugal bliss has turned out to be a chamber of imposed paralysis. Zhishou cannot turn on the light; she can not wipe her eyes; she cannot leave her bed. All she can do is fall back into “the dark bed” and lie still like a corpse. It is highly significant that the myriad of domestic objects crowd Zhishou’s view are nothing but

tantalizers towards annihilation. Rather than encourage the reproductive joy of birth, the clustered setting of the room engenders an ardent desire for the termination of death.

To end our discussion of “The Golden Cangue,” I want to draw our attention to the way Zhang creates a temporal enclosure by repeating the opening imagery at the end of her narrative. “The Golden Cangue” opens with “Shanghai thirty years ago on a moonlit night...” and ends with “[t]he moon of thirty years ago has gone down long since and the people of thirty years ago are dead but the story of thirty years ago is not yet ended—can have no ending” (171, 234). The resonance between the opening and the end evokes a cyclical sense of time, an unbreakable Karmic vortex of entrapment.

The idea that patriarchal heterosexual/marital relations do not only imprison women of the past but also perpetuate across time to ensnare women of the future is echoed by “Interlocking Chains.” As we have discussed, the loops of economic dependence on men have trapped Nixi, an illiterate and uncultured woman. But by the (unfinished) end of the story, her eldest daughter Selita, an intelligent thirteen-year-old girl who is going to a Catholic school, is on the verge of repeating Nixi’s life. In the very last scene, a go-between sent by Fa Lisi, a rich jeweler, is proposing on his behalf an engagement to Selita, in return for which, Fa Lisi promises financial support. Although the story ends before Nixi responds, she is left without many choices because she is again plunged into abject poverty after her abandonment by Mr. Thomson and is indeed looking for the next provider. The very likelihood that Selita will be “sold” just as Nixi was at fourteen extends the entrapping power of economic dependence to the next generation.



In conclusion, in the work of all the three writers under study, the physical structures and paraphernalia of domestic spaces are intertwined with social and psychological forces that define and confine female existence. Besides houses, rooms, and household articles, Zhang also uses female finery such as jewelry and clothing to create the imagery of confinement. Whereas American writers mainly express a concern with the “cornering” of the increasingly assertive and visible manless women, Zhang, whose imagination was shaped by the socioeconomic realities of her time, treats primarily the entrapment of women within patriarchal heterosexual/marital relations. As different as these two types of confinement may seem, extra-structure confinement in Welty and McCuller and intra-structure entrapment in Zhang are two sides of the same coin of the patriarchal effort to keep women under control and the symbolic order intact. In Chapters Two and Three, we have looked at the ways in which all three writers engage the Gothic motifs of the female grotesque and confinement to expose the limiting and frequently debilitating effects of patriarchal gender roles and control of women’s lives. In the next chapter, we will see how these writers employ the character of the female picaresque to tackle gender boundaries and explore possibilities of a different destiny than that of the uglified and imprisoned mothers.

## CHAPTER IV

### ESCAPE

Stasis and confinement inevitably generate the opposite narrative tendencies of movement and escape in female Gothic writings. As a matter of fact, the flight from imposed gender positions on the margin or at the core of patriarchal society and the search for personal fulfillment and social change are at the heart of female Gothicists' reinvention of the Gothic tradition. The very inception of female Gothic, as Moers suggests, lies in Ann Radcliffe's concept of "traveling heroinism," in which a Gothic picara (the product of the generic convergence between Gothic and the picaresque) exhibits exceptional bravery and performs extraordinary feats. As Moers writes, Radcliffe's Gothic heroine is "the traveling woman: the woman who moves, who acts, who copes with vicissitude and adventure. . . . In Mrs. Radcliffe's hands, the Gothic novel became a feminine substitute for the picaresque, where heroines could enjoy all the adventures and alarms that masculine heroes had long experienced, far from home, in fiction" (126). Radcliffe's incorporation of picaresque elements into the characterization of her Gothic heroines not only compensates the lack of women from the picaresque tradition but also enables the

female Gothic genre to emerge and envision escape from and rebellion against patriarchal strictures, in addition to indicting and protesting sexist and misogynist treatment of women.

Zhang, Welty, and McCullers all write stories about traveling women, who cross physical and psychological boundaries in pursuit of a better and freer life. In this chapter, I will look at Welty's "The Wanderers" (the last story of the collection *The Golden Apples*) McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, and Zhang's "Aloewood Incense: The First Brazier," "Love in a Fallen City," and "Sealed Off" as escape narratives. While movement/escape-oriented narrative patterns are a common feature of these stories, I suggest that the trajectories of the female protagonists' journey differ along national lines. I have concluded in Chapter Three that the American stories under examination primarily concern the social and psychological "cornering" of the "unmanned" and thus aberrant female existence on the margin of society. Zhang's works, on the contrary, take as their main subject the entrapment of "manned" women in economically-motivated heterosexual/marital relations. It follows that the escape from the constrictions of femininity as enacted in the American stories entails a break out of enforced alienation to either roam freely outside the carceral society or to attempt to reclaim and remake the heart of society. In contrast, Zhang's female protagonists leave the center of their universe—the home—and travel in hope of keeping away from the trap of unequal heterosexual/marital relations.

I also contend that in comparison with the American writers who exhibit a

considerable measure of optimism and hopefulness for the success of their picares' escapes, Zhang is deeply pessimistic about her female protagonists' chance of escaping the patriarchal trade in their body. Welty and McCullers's picares, represented by Virgie in "The Wanderers" and Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding* are, to varying degrees, able to execute their escape plans. But Zhang's traveling women, Jiang Weilong in "Aloewood Incense" and Bai Liusu in "Love in a Fallen City" veer away from the reality or prospect of conventional gender relations only to find themselves back in the trap of exploitation and stasis. However, Zhang's personal experience of the Japanese invasion of China in the 1940s enabled her to explore the transformative power of war and envisage a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity between man and woman which seems to have been given up upon by the American picares. Whereas the escapes of Virgie in "The Wanderers" and Frankie amount to renunciations of not only patriarchal society but also the male gender itself, inter-gender reconciliation and equality, however unsustainable or even delusional it may be, is an essential part of the escapes in Zhang's "Love in a Fallen City" and "Sealed Off."

#### **Virgie's Wandering out and Frankie's "Membering" in**

"The Wanderers" opens with the death and funeral of Virgie's mother, Katie Rainey. Although in her younger days, Katie is a rebellious figure in her own right, in her old age she has become rigidly set in a view of the world as consisting of distinct categories and inviolate boundaries. Demanding her daughter Virgie to come home and attend to household chores at set times of the day, she inadvertently imposes restraints on

Virgie's freedom on behalf of the town.

Forty years old and unmarried, Virgie is as alienated from the community as she was in adolescence. If her unbridled sexuality scandalized the community's sense of decorum back then, she now adds to her list of offenses an unabashed pursuit of economic independence and a willingness to work for the logging company that is plundering Morgana's woods. Although she commutes daily between the industrial MacLain and the rural Morgana, she is effectively blocked from her townspeople in Morgana and confined to an isolated life on the periphery of the town, the house she and Kate inhabit being "beyond the pavement" and nobody except Miss Snowdie having visited them in twenty years (427).

Katie's death undermines the town's delicate peace of mind regarding Virgie. A contamination of the community's customs and mores that has been somewhat contained for twenty years, Virgie is now released from her mother's house and free to roam the world. Anxious to direct Virgie's movement and control her future in ways beneficial instead of detrimental to the communal order, Morgana takes preemptory actions to assimilate its outcast daughter.

Having neglected and ostracized Katie and Virgie for years, the community swarms into their house upon the news of Katie's death. Katie's funeral is turned into an opportunity for the town to assert its authority in shaping individual lives (even in their deaths) and to enact and inculcate its core values especially gender roles. Miss Snowdie, the epitome of feminine virtues in Morgana, lays out Katie's corpse, while Virgie is

reduced to a passive spectator of the activities revolving around her own mother's funeral. "The kitchen filled with women as the parlor now filled with men" (434). Assuming no feminine attributes on Virgie's part, whose free-flowing sensuality and sexuality continue to irritate the town's senses "like a rope of bells she start[s] in their ears" (432), the town's women take it on themselves to model for Virgie the proper place and role of women. They flaunt what they believe they have and Virgie lacks: skills in cooking, techniques in house-keeping, and taste and experience in needlework.

Most important of all, the townspeople are determined to shove Virgie into matrimony. In the midst of their eulogistic remembrances of Katie, a collective voice demands: "Call Mr. Mabry now. [Virgie] is let loose" (435). Mr. Mabry, who has been ridiculed for his alleged exchange of quails for Virgie's sexual favors, is now summoned with urgency and showered in respect in hope of his prospective role in the domestication of Virgie. Jinny MacLain, wife of Ran MacLain, who has won the election for mayor on account of his macho executions in the past (he raped a girl and she committed suicide), comes bursting into the scene showing off her diamond wedding ring. She grimaces at Virgie "out of the iron mask of the married lady" (445). "It appeared urgent with her to drive everybody, even Virgie for whom she cared nothing, into the state of marriage along with her" (445).

When the townspeople go away after a day's preparation for the funeral, "they [seem] to drag some mythical gates and barriers away from her view" (439). The "gates and barriers" represent the invisible fortress the community builds around Virgie to limit

her threat to the traditional way of life. Now it opens its heart to embrace Virgie, but Virgie needs to comply with one condition: she is to be delivered into another form of incarceration—institutionalized marriage, the core pillar of social stability and guarantee of patrilineal continuity.

But Virgie turns her back on the socially-designated route of re-assimilation. Giving away her possessions, things that tie her down from a life of free wandering, she travels away from Morgana. When she reaches MacLain, she sits on a stile in the rain and watches the men in her life move past her, including Mr. Mabry, whom the people in Morgana have thought would marry her and make her respectable. But Virgie does not leave Morgana to “come, backward to protection” (459). “She had reached Mr. Mabry but she had passed him. . . .” (ibid.). Not only does she reject the protection of matrimony, she rejects all forms of patriarchal protection, including that of her boss “Mr. Nesbitt who want[s] to stand up for her” (ibid.). For she knows such protection comes at a price—the irrevocable subjugation of her will to another.

But if she forfeits the destination her community expects of her, what can she be and where is she going? Although Welty does not provide us with a concrete answer, she ends the story on an uplifting note and a vision of a freedom that is of cosmic proportions.

The rain of fall, maybe on the whole South, for all she knew on the everywhere. She stared into its magnitude. It was not only what expelled some shadow of Mr. Bitts, and pressed poor Mr. Mabry to search the street—it was air’s and the earth’s fuming breath, it could come and go. As if her own modesty could also fall upon her now, freely and coolly, outside herself and on the everywhere, she sat a little longer on the stile.

She smiled once, seeing before her, screenlike, the hideous and delectable face Mr. King MacLain had made at the funeral, and when they all knew he was next—even he. Then she and the old beggar woman, the old black thief, were there alone and together in the shelter

of the big public tree, listening to the magical percussion, the world beating in their ears. They heard through falling rain the running of the horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon's crusty slither, and the glimmer and the trumpet of the swan. (460-61)

Virgie lets herself merge with the rain, releasing her being into the universe. It is reminiscent of an earlier paragraph that describes her transcendent experience while swimming in the Big Black River. Mr. King MacLain, who functions as the ultimate symbol of masculine virility, dominion, and freedom in *The Golden Apples*, is no longer menacing, frightening, and superior in Virgie's flash of memory. That he can become pathetically senile and has to face death, just like everybody else, prophesizes an end to patriarchal domination. Then the dragon, a symbol conflated in Welty's text with the Medusa beheaded by Perseus, will come back to life, flying without restriction together with other mythical embodiments of cosmic power. The final scene in which Virgie and the black woman converge into a collective "they" highlights the authorial vision that Virgie's physical taking leave of the town marks a simultaneous ideological break-through. To arrive at this place of unlimited freedom, white women will need to break down the color line and join forces with their black sisters, instead of being shut down by Negrophobia like the spinster character Octavia in "Clytie."

Through Virgie in "The Wanderers" Welty posits an open-ended possibility for independent-minded women to exit the incarcerating society altogether for the sake of freedom. McCullers postulates another route of escape from imposed alienation in *The Member of the Wedding*. Rather than renouncing the oppressive society, McCullers's picara Frankie strikes out to remake and re-own the center of the world she lives in.

The story begins with a description of Frankie's isolation.



It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie has become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid. (461)

What has brought about her alienation from the world of clubs and connections is her dramatic growth spurt. In the past year, she has grown four inches. Not yet thirteen, she is five feet five and three quarter inches tall, the height of a regular grown girl (475). Since her size suggests physical maturation and the accompanying onset of sexuality, her delicate position within the patriarchal structure as father's daughter is upset. Although Frankie remains ignorant of adult sexuality, calling accounts of sexual intercourse "nasty lies" (469) and misconstruing her sexual act with a neighborhood boy as "a queer sin" (482), her mature height compels her father to perceive Frankie as a sexual being and imagine the possibility of incest. As a result, she is ejected from her father's bed. Because woman has no independent value in the patriarchal order, the rejection by her father throws Frankie into the liminal (read: worthless) space between girlhood and wifehood. Keith Byerman summarizes Frankie's involuntary exile into the in-between state in these incisive lines:

Before her ejection from his bed she belonged in the middle of the house; now she lives principally in its margins, the kitchen and her room over the porch. As a child she belonged within the structure, but as a daughter in a masculine household, she has no central place. She is now that which, by definition, must be gotten out of the house in order to serve her social purpose: marriage. In other words, she must be given to another man so as to have a place in the social order. Until this exchange happens, she is the outsider, the excess... Her banishment to the fringes of the house is both education in and metaphor of her condition. (26)

Disowned by the father, Frankie is not yet claimed by a husband. Her exile to the margins of the house resembles the alienation of "manless" womanhood discussed in Chapter Three. Unlike Miss Amelia, however, Frankie's marginalization seems temporary,

because as a maiden she is presumably on her way to “catch” a man. Her presupposed feminine potential offers her the prospect of re-assimilation on the condition of successful development of feminine traits. The passage to reentry is concretized in the neighborhood girls’ club, which cultivates heterosexual longings through clandestine education in normative sexual behavior and apprentices its members in the performance of feminine comportment and appearance.

However, Frankie, despite her previous friendship with the girls who now belong to this club, is denied membership because she is judged “too mean and young” to join (469). While Frankie’s father equates her height to incipient sexuality, the neighborhood girls correctly perceive the discrepancy between Frankie’s excessive size and her lacking sexual/gendered development. Her tomboy hardiness (“Frankie ha[s] the toughest feet in town” (484)) and competitiveness (she proudly declares herself to be “the best knife-thrower in this town” (491)) render her “too mean” in juxtaposition with womanly gentleness and submissiveness; her genuine incomprehension of and disgust towards heterosexual behavior make her “too young” to be the recipient of inside secrets of the girls’ club. Too old to stay in her father’s world as a child and too “young” to be admitted to the incubator of proper womanhood, Frankie is left simultaneously “caught” and “loose” in her enforced isolation on the margin of society (568).

What is even more significant to Frankie is that her exclusion from the world threatens to become her permanent state of being, not unlike Miss Amelia’s life imprisonment in her boarded-up house. Inspecting herself in the mirror, Frankie determines

that “according to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a Freak” (475). The consequence of her potentially gigantic proportions is that she will be fit for nothing but to be caged and displayed like the freaks she sees at the fair.

Compelled by the fear of permanent exclusion, Frankie envisions a novel way to reinstate herself in the world that she feels separated from since her ejection from her father’s bed. The visit of her brother Jarvis and his bride Janice inspires her to build her “we of me” (a collective locus of her identity) by way of re-imagining the conventional two-party wedding. The patriarchal marriage simultaneously restores a girl to the center of the world and confines her to her role as wife and mother. By imagining a three-party wedding among Jarvis and Janice and herself (now renamed F. Jasmine to create a unity through the repetition of the J A sound) in which she is just a “member” instead of a bride, she sets herself up to reap the benefit of marriage as the portal to reinstatement and to avoid the pitfall of entrapment in fixed gender roles. The vision of such a triadic union removes Frankie’s fear of eternal isolation. “[A]fter the scared spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid” (501).

It is not hard to see how Frankie’s vision of a triangulated wedding upsets the most fundamental presumptions of gender and gender relations in the patriarchal society. The unconventional part she imagines for herself undermines heterosexuality upon which marriage is traditionally predicated. In relation to this, her fluid gender status challenges the hierarchical relationship between husband and wife. Although Berenice the domestic

help warns her repeatedly that “two is company, three is a crowd,” Frankie is convinced that Jarvis and Janice will take her as a member of the marriage and through it she will be (re)connected with the whole world (529).

The rest of the novel consists of a series of physical/psychological movements on Frankie’s part. It starts with two rounds of Frankie’s forays into the heart of society for connections/“membership” and retreats back home to her marginalized position, the first time with shock and second time in failure. Frankie’s third move out of the house is to escape like Virgie into the vast possibilities and freedom of the larger world, but it ends with her being brought back by the law. However, the momentum of movement and change in Frankie’s life does not cease there. The third-person narrator tells us that Frankie will be on the road again as her family moves to a new house. If she has failed to remake the wedding, she has succeeded in becoming a member and her new “we of me,” with its homosocial and potentially homoerotic nature is no less subversive than her previous vision of a three-way wedding.

Frankie’s imaginary reentry into the world as a member of the triadic wedding constitutes her first round of “invasion” of the social centre. As she travels physically around the unnamed Southern town on the day before the wedding, Frankie is “occupied with one intention: to tell of the wedding and her plans” (509). The telling simultaneously establishes in Frankie’s mind (1) her part in the wedding as an undisputable fact and (2) her connectedness with her listeners and by extension the world, which are respectively, in Frankie’s imagination, the cause and the effect of her newly-gained central place in the

world.

The first person she tells her story to is the Portuguese owner of the Blue Moon café. “She went straight to the story, as a circus dog breaks through the paper hoop, and as she talked, her voice became clearer, more definite, and sure. She told her plans in a way that made them sound completely settled, and not in the least open to question. . . . [H]e did not dispute with her or doubt” (511). Then she talks to a housewife, a tractor-man, and many other people, “some known to her by sight and name, some strangers” (516). Despite her audience’s incomprehension and/or indifference, each telling makes the wedding more real in Frankie’s mind. For Frankie, the lack of dispute and expressed doubt from total strangers cancel out Berenice’s disbelief and strengthen her own faith in the feasibility of her plans. “The plans about the wedding stiffened and fixed with each new telling and finally came unchangeable” (516). “Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine felt connected with all she saw, and it was as a sudden member that on this Saturday she went around the town. She walked the streets entitled as a queen and mingled everywhere. It was the day when, from the beginning, the world seemed no longer separate from herself and when all at once she felt included” (502).

In other words, the telling of the wedding is Frankie’s speech act to reinsert herself in the world center. However, the novel sexual/gender identity she envisions that is central to this restorative act is counteracted by the combined forces of her own compulsion to act the conventional feminine role and the social pigeonholing of her as the stereotypical female party in a heterosexual relationship.

Her sense of centrality and connection with the world emboldens her to enter the Blue Moon Café which had been forbidden ground to the old Frankie, but there she encounters the red-haired soldier and mistakes his sexually-charged long look for the empathetic friendly look between fellow travelers (512). When she searches the town inside out for the monkey and the monkey man to tell her story, she meets the soldier again. Apparently taking her for older than she is and probably mistaking her for a prostitute, the soldier invites her to join him.

‘Which way are we going?’ the soldier said. ‘Are you going my way or am I going yours?’

F. Jasmine had not expected this. The soldier was joining with her like a traveler who meets another traveler in a tourist town. For a second, it occurred to her that she had heard this remark before, perhaps in a picture show—that furthermore it was a set remark requiring a set answer. Not knowing the ready-made reply, she answered carefully.

‘which way are you going?’

‘Hook on,’ he said, sticking out his elbow.

They walked down the side street ... The soldier was the only person during that day who spoke first to F. Jasmine and invited her to join with him. But, when she began to tell about the wedding, something seemed lacking. Perhaps it was because she had already told her plans to so many people all over town that she could rest satisfied. Or perhaps it was because she felt the soldier was not really listening. He looked at the pink organdie dress from the corner of his eye, and there was a half-smile on his mouth. (520)

Despite Frankie’s incomprehension of and aversion to heterosexuality, she has unconsciously assimilated normative patterns of romantic encounters as disseminated by popular media such as the movies. Automatically enacting the heterosexual script, Frankie joins the soldier and the two are heading to the soldier’s place. Although Frankie can hardly hear the sexual subtext of their brief exchange, she intuitively grasps the incongruence between the story of her triadic wedding and her “hooking-on” with the soldier. Whereas the story of the wedding enables Frankie to transcend traditional gender roles, the soldier sees Frankie as entirely defined by her feminine costume—an object of

desire.

The conversation and activities that ensue between the soldier and Frankie reinforce the contradiction between Frankie's vision of triangulated human relationship and the soldier's single-minded execution of heterosexual romance. Frankie continues to be preoccupied with the imagining of her life with her brother and the bride, picturing the three of them in her mind's eye as tied together by a rope while climbing a sunny glacier in Alaska. The soldier on the other hand keeps repeating the trite starter of romantic encounters ("I could of sworn I'd run into you some place before" [521, 524]) and mumbling suggestive remarks (for example, "who is a cute dish?" [523]). The two sit face to face in the Blue Moon café but talk only at cross-purposes.

Overall, Frankie's encounter with the soldier parodies the normative romantic script. In his drunken state, the soldier faithfully, albeit haphazardly, enacts the procedures of courtship. He buys Frankie drinks, invites her out on a date, and takes her into his hotel room. Frankie responds first out of a compulsion to act her feminine acquiescent part in a romantic situation but hits the soldier with a pitcher and escapes when he tries to have sex with her.

Although the soldier's advance on Frankie's body fails, he succeeds in intercepting Frankie's imaginary reentry by imposing upon it his and the society's terms of woman's reinstallation in man's world as a sexual object. From Frankie's points of view, the connection she feels with the world, a crucial facet of her restoration at the world center, is perverted and destroyed. The happy fantasy of reentry ends in a shocked and hasty

retreat back home to her marginal position.

Unlike Frankie's imaginary reentry, her actual attempt to be included in the wedding is not directly and fully dramatized but narrated briefly as a memory. Frankie travels with her father, Berenice, and John Henry to Winter Hill and attends her brother's wedding. There she loses the motor and the oral skills she exhibits during her journey through the town the previous day.

The Wedding was like a dream, for all that came about occurred in a world beyond her power; from the moment when, sedate and proper, she shook hands with the grown people until the time, the wrecked wedding over, when she watched the car with the two of them driving away from her, and, flinging herself down in sizzling dust, she cried out for the last time: 'Take me! Take me!'—from the beginning to the end the wedding was unmanaged as a nightmare. By mid-afternoon it was all finished and the return bus left at four o'clock. (587-588)

She wants to tell her brother and the bride about her plans for the three of them but "her tongue [is] heavy in her mouth and dumb" (590). She intuitively feels the power of convention to operate according to its own logic and dispel any attempt for change. Although she describes mistakenly the highly-conventionalized, rigid program of the wedding as "unmanaged," she instinctively grasps her designated role as a young attendee, whose duty of proper "handshaking" and other ritualistic functions she performs in the same mechanical manner as she has enacted her feminine role of compliance with the soldier. As in the previous encounter, it is not until the last moment when the newly-weds are driving away that Frankie jerks out of her hypnotic mode. Her desperate attempt to cling to the car and insert herself in between the wedding parties notwithstanding, her bid of reclaiming the central position of the world on her own terms ends in utter failure and humiliation.



Although she is pulled apart from the newly-weds and has to acknowledge her inability to realize or sustain her vision in the real world, she has not, as some critics say, succumbed to her imprisonment on the margin of the patriarchal order (see, for instance, Byerman 29). On the same night of the wedding, Frankie escapes from her father's house: "The wedding had not included her, but she would still go into the world" (593), beyond the periphery of her family home and the town. Like Virgie, who escapes the Southern community where she and her mother have lived all their lives and goes into the world without a specific destination, Frankie entertains a number of possibilities but decides on none. But unlike Virgie, whose adulthood guarantees her freedom to wander outside her community, Frankie is brought back home by the local policeman. By now, all Frankie's efforts at escaping her cornered position in the imprisoning house of her father have failed.

However, McCullers does not let the momentum of Frankie's restless movement stop here. By the end of the story, Frankie's family is moving to a new place and she is crossing the threshold of age thirteen. More significantly, she develops a new type of "we of me"—her friendship with a girl named Mary Littlejohn. Their relationship is not simply a miniature form of girls' club, i.e., the homosocial transition before their entry into patriarchal womanhood. Instead, it is grounded in both girls' love of travel and their "masculine" ambitions: "Mary was going to be a great painter and Frances a great poet—or else the foremost authority on radar . . . [and] they were going around the world together" (602). In addition, the homoerotic potential of the Frankie-Mary dynamics raises hope for continuing subversive acts on Frankie's part against the heterosexual norm: in a

manner that mocks the wedding, she and Mary will “take dinner, spend the night, and ride in the van to the new house tomorrow” (602). It is also interesting to note that the story ends in a moment pregnant with forthcoming movement and fulfillment: as Frankie waits for Mary’s arrival, she exclaims “I am simply mad about—[Mary]” but leaves her sentence unfinished “when, with an instant shock of happiness, she hear[s] the ringing of the bell” (605). Although McCullers does not go so far as to materialize Frankie’s reentry into the world as an integral part of this unconventional union, she leaves the reader with enough hope for the success of this new “we of me” and the triumphant entry of the two into society on their own terms.

### **Zhang’s Trapped Picas and Their Escapes amid National Calamities**

Zhang also writes of traveling women in her stories. As a rule, her picaras travel away from home to avoid snares of traditional heterosexual/marital relations. In contrast to Welty and McCullers’s confidence in their picaras’ endeavors, Zhang shows grave reservations of her protagonists’ abilities to achieve better and freer lives on their own. The trips and traps in the lives of Jiang Weilong in “Aloewood Incense” and Bai Liusu in “Love in a Fallen City” illustrate as much the limitations as the possibilities of the picaras’ travels. However, I suggest that Zhang entertains the possibility of inter-gender reconciliation and understanding which seems utterly unimaginable for the American writers. In order to be free, Virgie has to walk away from marriage and take leave of all the men in her life. Likewise, Frankie gives no place to man or heterosexuality in planning her future. But Zhang explores the conditions under which her picaras can arrive at a

somewhat egalitarian relationship with man. Through “Love in a Fallen City” and “Sealed Off,” Zhang expounds her shocking vision that, in the final analysis, national calamities are a necessary condition for the success of women’s escape from patriarchal gender roles in that they (1) explode the familiar strictures women are subject to and encourage a reevaluation of their position in relation to men; and (2) reduce the dominant gender to the powerless status of the female and create a sympathetic understanding of women’s situation. Leveling social constructions of gender difference and hierarchy along with the physical structures of civilization, war enables a mutuality and reciprocity between man and woman that is beyond the patriarchal imagination.

Weilong in “Aloewood Incense” is a high school student who dreams of independence and autonomy like a new woman. She decides not to move back to Shanghai with her family after their two-year-long sojourn in Hong Kong because she anticipates the termination of her study and her inevitable confinement in traditional marriage. Instead, she moves in with her aunt, Madame Liang, whose financial support she seeks in hope of finishing her education and becoming a self-reliant working woman.

Unfortunately, Weilong’s flight from home and the traditional womanhood it implies lands her not on the solid pathway to freedom and independence but on the quicksand of human desires. Madame Liang promises financial assistance with the sole intention to exploit Weilong’s attractive appearance to her own advantage. Having married a sixty-year-old Hong Kong tycoon for his money, Madame Liang is left with an insatiable hunger for romance and sexual pleasure in her old age. To supplement whatever appeal her

aging body holds for the opposite sex, she recruits young girls as baits to entice the men she wants.

Although Weilong is quick to see her role as a sexual pawn in her aunt's romantic schemes, she is ready to collude rather than to forfeit her dream of independence. Stepping into the shoes of a social butterfly as her aunt desires, she carefully navigates the incessant romantic dramas Madame Liang stages against the backdrop of garden parties, balls, poker games, etc. Wary of the undergrowth of lust, jealousy, and greed that energizes these social events, Weilong remains emotionally uninvolved, keeps up her study, and dreams of going to college.

However, a few months into her adventure inside Madame Liang's mansion, Weilong meets George, the disfavored son of a rich Chinese merchant and his Portuguese prostitute-turned concubine. Weilong, because of her vehement rejection of marrying for money, is in a strange twist of the psyche drawn to George for his bleak prospect of garnering any inheritance and his seeming nonchalance to his situation. After an unsuccessful attempt to extricate herself from this romantic entanglement, Weilong decides to prostitute her body so as to support her life with George.

That Zhang would perceive prostitution as a desirable alternative to traditional marriage and thus a route of escape seems absurd. If the main discontent of traditional marriage is its objectification of the female body as a commodity to be bought and owned, prostitution offers no relief. However, in the Chinese literary imagination (particularly in *chuanqi*), if not in reality, prostitution does sometimes open up for women (especially,

high-class courtesans) the possibility of a measure of economic independence and a measure of control of their own body, however problematic it is, which traditional marriage flatly denies women.<sup>1</sup> In some *chuanqi* stories (for example, “The Courtesan’s Jewel Box” 杜十娘 [Dushiniang]), courtesans develop consensual relationships with impoverished scholars. Through prostitution, they support the lovers in their study and pursuit of official recognition and office. Their relationship stops being that of prostitute and client and comes close to cohabiting partners. The possibility of sexual subjectivity and conjugal bliss represented by courtesan figures posits a sharp contrast to the institutionalized “prostitution within marriage” arrangement of the traditional family. This, coupled with women’s dismal prospect for employment in 1940s China as discussed in Chapter Three, I suggest, propels Zhang to postulate an escape route through prostitution.

Nevertheless, Zhang is not blind to the fact that Weilong’s choice of prostitution as her means of economic independence and sexual subjectivity is ultimately self-defeating. “Aloewood Incense” ends with Weilong and George’s visit to a sea-side market on the Chinese New Year’s Eve. The market is teeming with fashionably dressed people and dazzling goods—a most festive and cheerful place. But its flamboyance only sets in relief Weilong’s sense of desolation. Stretching beyond the loud colors of lights and people and goods, Weilong sees “the clear desolation of sea and sky; endless emptiness, endless terror” (75). Her dream of control over her economic and sexual destiny has turned into a vicious joke, sentencing her to enslavement by her aunt’s lust and George’s greed. “From

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<sup>1</sup> See Hsieh 15-19 for detailed discussion of the influence of courtesan culture on legends of courtesans in *chuanqi*.

then on, it was as if Weilong had been sold to Madame Liang and George Qiao. She was busy all day long, getting money for George Qiao and people for Madame Liang” (73).

In this light, Zhang’s “Aloewood Incense” is about the limit as much as the possibility of women’s escape from exploitative heterosexual/marital relationships. Whatever its real or imagined advantages in comparison with traditional marriage, prostitution is a deeply flawed solution to women’s dilemma. That it is the inevitable choice for Weilong only highlights the depth of subjugation of women in Chinese society.

“Aloewood Incense” is Zhang’s first published story. She continues to explore possibilities of escape in her later works. For example, “Love in a Fallen City” reiterates the theme of the limited efficacy of a picara’s efforts to remake her life. But it also posits a shocking vision that the picara achieves the farthest distance from traditional gender relations when a disaster befalls the nation.

The story begins after Liusu has broken out of matrimony. She has divorced her violent husband and come back to live in her parents’ house under the same roof with her brothers and in-laws. Her apparent freedom and independence is jeopardized first by the loss of her part of the inheritance and then the news of the death of her ex-husband. Her brothers and in-laws have used up her money and now blame her for their declining fortunes. Their eagerness to throw her out of the family house is further fanned by the news of the death of her ex-husband. Ignoring the fact that Liusu has divorced, they threaten to send Liusu back to live out a chaste widowhood. It is important to note that chaste widowhood, like traditional marriage, is a contract based on the exchange of the

control over woman's body for economic support. On the premise of the widow's chastity as a manifestation of her devotion to the diseased husband, she is provided for by the husband's family. But widowhood is worse than marriage in that the widow is tied to a dead person and bereft of hope. Driven desperate, Liusu embarks on a journey in pursuit of an apparently regressive objective—to get a rich husband. She deliberately grabs the attention of a diamond bachelor, Fan Liuyuan, who is introduced to her family originally as her younger sister Baolu's match. After two trips to Hong Kong and several rounds of delicate maneuvers to win Fan's heart, Liusu is offered the prize of mistresshood, which is short of the solid victory of marriage that she has aimed at but nonetheless meets her primary concern of economic security.

After providing her with a house and servant, Liuyuan leaves Hong Kong for a year-long business trip in Europe. Liusu has had hardly a moment of excitement before she realizes she has come full circle to imprisonment and stagnation. Contemplating her future in her big empty house, Liusu is tormented by the thought of the age-old route of the concubine that seems now to be her fate. "Play mah-jongg with Mrs. Xu, watch operas? Start flirting with actors, smoke opium, go the route of the concubine? She pulled herself up short and straightened her shoulders, clenching her clasped hands behind her back. It was not going to come to that! She was not that kind of person, she could control herself. But ... could she keep from going mad?" (156). Her house is not yet filled with furniture and decorations that jam and barricade the existence of many other women characters in Zhang's fiction. Nevertheless, Liusu feels caged and is pressed down by an overwhelming

sense of paralysis that visits Zhishou in “Cangue” (see Chapter Three 133-135): “Liusu lay on the bed. She wanted to turn off all the lights, but she couldn’t move an inch” (156).

It is important to point out that what has led Liusu’s pursuit of personal happiness not forward but backward to a paralyzing relationship is Liusu and Liuyuan’s internalization of patriarchal gender roles in general and the transactional logic of heterosexual relationships in particular. In regards to Liuyuan, despite a visionary part of him that imagines and longs for a world free from gender hierarchy, his desires and means of satisfying them are intransigently shaped by patriarchal culture. He is attracted by Liusu’s performance of culturally-defined ideals of feminine beauty—in his words, “these little gestures, and a romantic aura, very much like a Peking opera singer” (144)—including her habitual head bowing; and he is not above using his money and power to obtain sexual satisfaction. In the following episode, he prophesies an apocalyptic end of the world which is paradoxically a utopia of love, but this transcendent vision is soon caught up and crowded out by his utilitarian impulse to take advantage of his patriarchal privileges as a rich and buying man.

Liuyuan has taken Liusu to the old city wall of Hong Kong. Against the somber hues of the wall, Liuyuan muses:

“I don’t know why,” said Liuyuan, looking at her, “but this wall makes me think of the old sayings about the end of the world. Someday, when human civilization has been completely destroyed, when everything is burnt, burst, utterly collapsed and ruined, maybe this wall will still be here. If at that time, we can meet at this wall, then maybe, Liusu, you will honestly care about me, and I will honestly care about you.” (139)

Here, Liuyuan sheds his playboy persona and contemplates seriously about the possibility of a mutual relationship. He intuitively grasps the transformative power of war and



destruction: only on the ruins of (patriarchal) civilization, only when man is not positioned to exploit woman's sexuality and woman does not depend on such exploitation for livelihood, man and woman can finally begin to build a relationship of mutual understanding and sincere care.<sup>2</sup> However, his utopia of sincere and mutual love has hardly taken shape in rhetoric when it is displaced by a blunt admission and even self-congratulation of his privilege and power: "I like to have a good time—and I have plenty of money, plenty of time—do I need any other reasons?" (140).

While Liuyuan's desire for a romantic relationship predicated upon gender equality and mutuality is thwarted by his vested interest in patriarchy, Liusu's audacious pursuit of a better life is foredoomed by her inability to imagine a way out other than the self-defeating route of trading sexuality for security. Liuyuan represents to her from their very first encounter to the point she becomes his mistress no more than a means to salvage her faltering socio-economic status.

Right after the row with her brothers and sisters-in-law in which she is accused of being a parasite and threatened with eviction, Liusu retreats to her room and examines herself in the mirror. There she hears the Fourth Master play *huqin*—an indispensable instrument in Peking opera. This recalls the opening lines in which the narrator laments the absence of a radiant opera singer to act to the music of *huqin*. "The tale of the *huqin* should be performed by a radiant entertainer, two long streaks of rouge pointing to her exquisite nose as she sings, as she smiles, covering her mouth with her sleeve . . ." (111). Now, in a

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<sup>2</sup> This particular vision reappears in a less drastic manner when Liuyuan expresses his desire to take Liusu with him on a retreat to primitive uncivilized lands, so as to cure her of her compulsion to perform and to restore her natural instincts and desires ("Love" 143-144).

flight of fantasy, Liusu assumes the role of the entertainer.

Out on the balcony, Fourth Master had once again taken up his *huqin*. The tune rose and fell, and Liusu's head tilted to one side as her eyes and hands started moving through dance poses. As she performed in the mirror, the *huqin* no longer sounded like a *huqin*, but like strings and flutes playing a solemn court dance. She took a few paces to the right, then a few to the left. Her steps seemed to trace the lost rhythms of an ancient melody.

Suddenly, she smiled—a shadowy, malevolent smile; the music came to a discordant halt. The *huqin* went on playing outside, but it was telling tales of fealty and filial piety, chastity and righteousness: distant tales that had nothing to do with her. (121-122) <sup>3</sup>

A few critics have cited the passage above as evidence of the subversive aspect of Liusu's characterization. In her work *Women's literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China*, Amy Dooling argues that Liusu, who dances here alone and with Liuyuan in the later development of the story, is aligned with the most famous Chinese *femme fatale* Yang Guifei, whose foreign-style dancing allegedly lured the Tang emperor Xuanzong away from state affairs and caused the upheaval and near collapse of the Tang dynasty in the eighteenth century (167). However, in "Love in a Fallen City" Zhang overrides the misogynistic logic of the traditional legends of "kingdom-toppling" beauties. Dooling suggests, and I agree, that Zhang "refuses to implicate feminine sexuality in historical disorder . . . [but] represents it as a source of personal agency for her heroine" (167-168). Liusu manipulates her erotic appeal for submerged "selfish" purposes, which metonymically surface in her "shadowy, malevolent smile," unequivocally hostile to masculine order and ideology. Likewise, Eileen Joy Cheng, in her dissertation, writes: "[Liusu's] 'malevolent smile' hints at her refusal to perform certain ritualized and approved

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<sup>3</sup> Here I use Kingsbury's translation except one word in the last quoted sentence: 阴阴的, which literally means "cloudy" with connotations of malignance and mystery. Kingsbury translates it as "private," which not only obliterates the foreboding the original invokes but also looks redundant given that previous paragraphs have made it clear enough that Liusu is all by herself contemplating her reflection in the mirror. I have replaced it with "shadowy."

versions of femininity which may not be in her own self-interest" (246). Her transformation from a Peking opera singer, whose highly stylized moves epitomize in Zhang's fictional *and* non-fictional pieces the patriarchal ideal of Chinese womanhood,<sup>4</sup> to a dancer of dubious lineage, for whom traditional virtues are irrelevant, undoubtedly sets her apart from the legion of unresisting women in Zhang's fictional world such as Chuanchang in "A Withered Flower" and Zhishou in "The Golden Cangue," who do not protest or fight their tragic fates.

However, I maintain that even as her performance of femininity and subtle metamorphosis indicate a measure of agency to undermine patriarchal oppression from within, they also betray her acceptance of the social definition of heterosexual relationships as fundamentally the same as between seller and buyer. A Peking opera singer or a sensual dancer, the roles Liusu impersonates are always entertainers whose services, artistic and sexual (because, in Zhang's era, it is not unusual for entertainers to supplement their humble earnings on stage with backstage sexual transactions), are up for sale. In her contact with Liuyuan, there is no genuine attraction or sincere concern, only schemes and calculations to maximize her chance to secure a willing provider. In the passage following Liuyuan's envisioning the utopia of love in the ruins of civilization and his anticlimactic

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<sup>4</sup> In an essay called "Peking Opera through Foreign Eyes and More" 洋人看京戏及其它 (Yangren kan jingxi ji qita), Zhang observes that "In Peking Opera, it could be said that rules are at their most complex and numerous," but its beauty lies in nothing but the conventionalized movements and makeup (97; my translation). At the center of such a highly stylized form of art, *dan*'s (female lead) body, speech, singing and steps are all heavily regulated (shaped) by long-standing conventions. She is little more than a programmed automaton, acting out the aesthetics of traditional China. The absence of a self in the opera singer, which is analogous to the selfless ideal of Chinese womanhood, is also dealt with in a story called "After the Opera" 散戏 (Sanxi). The female protagonist Nan Gonghua is an aging opera singer, whose talent lies oddly in aphasia—"a unique silence in her voice" (73). "She can talk a great deal of nonsense (on the stage) and nobody would think that she has ever opened her mouth" (72-73; my translation). In view of the above textual evidence, I suggest that the opera singer epitomizes the self-less womanly ideal in Chinese culture.

reverting back to a predatory stance in relation to women, Liuyuan is momentarily tormented by his contradicted, schizophrenic psyche.

He thought it over and again grew frustrated. He said to her, "I don't understand myself—but I want you to understand me! I want you to understand me!" He spoke like this, and yet in his heart he'd already given up hope. Still, stubbornly, plaintively he went on: "I want you to understand me!"

Liusu was willing to try. She was willing to try anything, within limits. She leaned her head in his direction, and answered softly, "I do understand. I do." But while comforting him, she suddenly thought of her moonlit face. That delicate profile, the eyes, the brow—beautiful beyond reason; misty, ethereal. Slowly she bowed her head.

Liuyuan began chuckling. "That's right, don't forget," he said, in a new tone of voice. "Your specialty is bowing the head. But there are those who say that only teenage girls can bow the head well. If you're good at it, then it becomes a habit. And when you've bowed the head for many years, you might end up with a wrinkled neck." (140)

Although Liuyuan's appeal for understanding is outright selfish in that it does not imply a reciprocal inclination to understand Liusu (her needs and concerns), his yearning for communication at a deeper level does open up a rare, albeit imperfect, opportunity for an honest exchange between the two. Unfortunately, driven by the urgent need for economic security, Liusu is not interested in spiritual communion; she is only "willing" to "understand" as far as her "understanding" furthers her objective of capturing Liuyuan's heart, or rather money. But even this half-hearted attempt to comprehend and console is hijacked immediately by her hyperawareness of her role as the desperate seller of feminine charms in relation to Liuyuan. Anxious about the marketability of her goods, Liusu shifts her attention to her own looks. In a most comical but poignant stroke, Zhang drives home Liusu's compulsion to maximize her erotic hold on Liuyuan: although her profile is already beautiful "beyond reason," Liusu bows her head in the hope of further enhancement. Liusu's studied performance of feminine beauty borders on excess; it sends Liuyuan to

laughter and back to his usual mood of a condescending connoisseur. Resuming his voice as the discriminating and selecting buyer, Liuyuan maliciously invokes Liusu's worst fear: the aging and depreciation of her merchandise metonymically represented as the "wrinkled neck." By far, what started as a hopeful opening for deeper, unconventional communication has degenerated and ended up reinforcing the patriarchal assumptions and gender performances of both Liusu and Liuyuan. Just as Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding* experiences an irresistible compulsion to conform to the patriarchal script of gendered behavior, Liusu is utterly unable to break away from her normative role as an object of desire in the sexual economy.

The passage above exemplifies the inability of Liusu (and Liuyuan) to transcend the patriarchal construction of heterosexual relationship as the same as between seller and buyer. Ultimately, in Zhang's fictional world, no individual's effort, however ruthless and audacious it may be, leads to the opening of a qualitatively different life. In "Aloewood Incense," Weilong's quest for economic independence lands her on the dubious path of prostitution. In "Love in a Fallen City," Liusu's effort to get herself out of the stifling family situation she is in at the beginning of the story earns her nothings but a paralyzing mistresshood. However, whereas Zhang leaves Weilong's story in fatalistic resignation, she allows in an influential cultural/historical factor that eventually enables Liusu and Liuyuan to build a relation of equality and mutuality—the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in 1941.

Liuyuan's Europe-bound steamer sets sail on the eve of Japanese invasion of

Hong Kong. It is forced back into port when the fighting breaks out. Liuyuan rejoins Liusu and the two, after an attempt to sit out the battle at the Repulse Bay Hotel, are forced to return to their ravaged house. Even after the weeks of fighting are over, they are made to eke out a humble existence in the ruins of the city until Liuyuan can secure passage on a boat to Shanghai. It is under these extreme circumstances that Liusu and Liuyuan rid themselves of their habits of gendered thinking and behavior. The materialization of true love between Liusu and Liuyuan bears considerable resemblance to the happy ending of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Susanne Becker points out in her work *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*: the blissful union between Jane Eyre and Rochester "ultimately requires the destruction of Thornfield, Rochester's dependency and Jane's emotional and social empowerment" (38). In the same vein, a relationship of mutuality and empathy does not realize for Liusu and Liuyuan until Hong Kong, a city famous for business transactions of all kinds including the trade in human flesh, is blasted into rubble, and the two are equalized in the experience of war. Against the backdrop of total destruction and upheaval, Liusu and Liuyuan, who have no one but each other to depend on, develop genuine empathy through shared perils, hunger, and poverty. Reduced by the war from a powerful rich merchant to a helpless victim of circumstances, Liuyuan arrives at a true understanding of and sympathy for Liusu's compulsion to scheme and calculate. His condescension and grudge against Liusu for her inability to love is replaced by a sincere care and readiness to engage in an interdependent partnership. At the same time, Liusu, her artificial façade torn off by war and her rich client swept away, is free to feel and live.

The passage about Liusu and Liuyuan's return to their badly-damaged house is worth noting for its multi-layered, symbolic meanings. Greeted by the desolate look inside the wreckage of their house that mirrors the larger destruction of the city, Liusu discovers that the house has been used and abandoned by perhaps some British troops and their prostitutes.

They were home. They pushed open the half-shut door, and a little flock of pigeons took wing and fled. The Hallway was full of dirt and pigeon droppings. Liusu went to the staircase and cried out in surprise. The brand-new trunks she had put in the rooms upstairs were strewn about wide open, and two of them had slid partway down to the ground floor, so that the stairs were buried in a flowing mass of satins and silks. Liusu bent down and picked up a brown wool-lined cheongsam. It wasn't hers. Sweat marks, dirt, cigarette burns, the scent of cheap perfume. She found more women's things, old magazines, and an old can of lychees, the juice dripping out onto her clothes. Had some troops been staying here? British troops who had women with them? They seemed to have left in a hurry. (163)

The trunks which function in "The Golden Cangu" as an important signifier of confinement reappear here in Liusu's story with the opposite implications. Instead of being safely locked up in upstairs rooms, they have been dislodged by the force and agents of war, represented in the story by the Japanese bombardment and perhaps the British soldiers. Two of the trunks have even "slid partway down to the ground floor," enacting a frantic scene of escape. In addition, rather than shutting in the wealth Liusu has garnered *and* the sexual and personal freedom she has traded in for the wealth, these trunks are "strewn about wide open," their "inmates" of silks and satins having flown out and spread all over the stairs, symbolically releasing Liusu from incarceration.

It is also significant that among these familiar clothing items that belong to Liusu, Liusu spots a cheongsam and other women's things that she readily identifies as *not* hers. She speculates that these articles belonged to prostitutes whom the British troops had taken

with them. Her thought of prostitutes calls into mind a conversation between Liusu and Liuyuan before the war in which Liuyuan accurately grasped Liusu's economic motivation and described her notion of marriage as "long-term prostitution" (149). Here, with her unequivocal judgment that the prostitutes' cheongsam and other things are *not* hers, Liusu declares her success in exorcizing her mercenary double. The war has transformed Liusu's relationship with men: her union with Liuyuan is now mainly driven by a shared commitment and mutual understanding, rather than economic considerations. Dooling supports my contention when she says: "The real revelation of the story (and the second more literal meaning of the title) is . . . the following: it is not the passionate love emanating from the beautiful woman that produces social upheaval, but rather social upheaval that produces conditions for passionate love" (169).

Nearing the end of the story Zhang paints a literal picture of Liuyuan's earlier vision of love in the ruins of civilization.

[A]t night, in that dead city, no lights, no human sounds . . . and there was only a stream of empty air, a bridge of emptiness that crossed into the dark, into the void of voids. Here everything had ended. There were only some broken bits of leveled wall and, stumbling and fumbling about, a civilized man who had lost his memory; he seemed to be searching for something, but there was nothing left.

Liusu sat up hugging her quilt and . . . [s]he seemed to return in a dream, back to the base of that wall, where she met Liuyan, *finally and truly* met him.

Here in this uncertain world, money, property, the permanent things—they are all unreliable. The only thing she could rely on was the breath in her lungs, and this person who lay sleeping beside her. Suddenly, she crawled over to him, hugging him through his quilt. He reached out from the bedding and grasped her hand. They looked and saw each other, saw each other *entirely*. It was a mere moment of deep understanding, but it was enough to keep them happy together for a decade or so. (164; my emphasis)

Zhang's vision that the national calamity of war constitutes the very necessary conditions for women to escape from the exploitation and oppression of traditional



heterosexual relationships is downright iconoclastic. We have noted in passing the incorporation/subordination of feminist issues under the overarching nationalist agenda in China's modern history in Chapter Two. As Dooling notes in the introduction to her book, Chinese feminism was not subject to the same political and cultural condemnation that its counterpart in the west suffered. Imported from the west as part of modernity, it was embraced by the self-styled modern men (2). "Gender liberation served as an immensely fertile rhetorical terrain on which self-styled modern male intellectuals were able to work through and articulate their disavowal of traditional forms of authority" (3). In addition, the modern Chinese literary canon enlists

the image of the oppressed female body as an allegorical space on which to inscribe (his)stories of the nation: would-be "feminist" concerns about women's physical mutilation (foot-binding, in particular), rape, prostitution, female suicide, and so forth have found vivid expression in twentieth-century cultural narratives but routinely operate on a symbolic or metaphorical level to articulate the violation of China's national body, rather than specific instances of women's experience of physical and sexual violence. (3)

In other words, the very images and narratives of female sufferings and victimization were co-opted for nationalist programs of modernization and anti-imperialist resistance. The trope of analogizing the nation's plight and the suffering of the female body became one of the most powerful patterns and conventions underpinning the narrativization of women in modern Chinese fiction. In contrast, as we have seen, Zhang completely undermines the association between the pillaged country and the suffering woman. The Japanese bombardment and invasion of Hong Kong have enabled Liusu to escape from oppressive gender relations instead of subjecting her body to the violence and scourge of war. Zhang's meaning is clear: war may carry nothing but deprivation and annihilation for the dominant

gender, yet it is for women destructive and constructive at the same time. Weakening or even undermining the old oppressive system, it creates room for the disempowered gender to re-vision and reconstruct heterosexual relations.

Zhang's own experience as a woman writer in Japanese-occupied Shanghai must have played a role in the formation of her vision of the transformative forces of war. Zhang owes her shot to literary stardom at least partly to the same national calamity that enables her women characters' escapes—the Japanese invasion. The nationalist literature that started with (if not before) the May fourth movement put at its center stage national scourge under foreign aggression on the one hand, and the patriotic drive for liberation and modernity on the other. But as we have discussed in Chapter One, Zhang's writing strategy does not concern nationalist undertakings as much as individual consciousness and destinies. Since she privileges the exploration of women's subjectivity and life choices over "larger" historical events, it is hard to imagine that her works would be received with enthusiasm by a nationalist-minded press. But the special circumstances of Japanese occupied Shanghai banned resistance literature and therefore prepared, in a manner sinister to many of Zhang's contemporaries, a market for "apolitical" writings like Zhang's *Chuanqi*. Related to this is the exodus of "progressive" writers from the foreign concessions in Shanghai to the north, which led to a vacuum in the literary scene that otherwise would not so easily recognize the talents of a mere twenty-three-year-old woman who had yet to finish her college degree.

However, it is also important to point out that Zhang's optimism in the

transformative power of war to deliver women from patriarchal gender relations is shadowed by a profound sense of (her and her characters') inability to sustain their escapes. The mutual understanding developed during the war would "keep [Liusu and Liuyuan] happy together for a decade or so" (164), but one questions that, away from the equalizing ruins of Hong Kong, how much of the empathy between Liusu and Liuyuan will survive. After all, as soon as Liusu and Liuyuan resettle in Shanghai (which is still free from the scourge of war), Liuyuan seems to have reverted back to his attitude towards women as playthings and does not refrain from taking liberties with other women even though he and Liusu are now married. Despite the quite triumphant and light-hearted note on which "Love in a Fallen City" ends, which is uncharacteristic of Zhang's fiction, one can not help but speculate it is only a matter of time before Liusu feels trapped again.

Interestingly, Zhang reiterates her understanding of the momentary, even delusional, nature of women's wartime escapes in "Sealed Off," which was published no more than two months after "Love in a Fallen City." The female protagonist Wu Cuiyuan is a college instructor in her mid twenties. Her enviable socioeconomic status notwithstanding, she is still trapped by her family's demand that she get herself a rich husband. Significantly, just as the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong enables Liusu to escape the mercenary imperative of heterosexual relationships, the fall of Shanghai to Japanese power constitutes the backdrop of Cuiyuan's rebellion against her family's expectations. War, which appears in full-scale devastation in "Love in a Fallen City," now shows a less pervasive but nevertheless menacing face—a blockade, i.e., the Japanese military practice

of sealing off a certain part of the city to search for suspects.

When the bus Cuiyuan rides on comes to a halt due to a blockade, a fellow passenger by the name of Zongzhen, starts flirting with her. He is married and has no money. Although Cuiyuan dislikes him for his impudence in the beginning, she sees his open confessions as a sign of his respect for her as an equal. She falls in love because Zongzhen presents her with a chance of rebellion: “[Her parents] wanted her to find them a wealthy son-in-law; Zongzhen didn’t have money but he did have a wife” (249). However, as soon as the blockade ends, Zongzhen moves back to his old seat. “Then she understood his meaning: everything that had happened while the city was sealed off was a nonoccurrence. The whole city of Shanghai had dozed off and dreamed an unreasonable dream” (251).

In retrospect, the stories in which Zhang enacts temporary escapes for her discontented women characters read like uncanny prophecies for her foreshortened literary career. As Ke Ling comments, when he looks back at Zhang’s literary career:

When I hold up my fingers and count, there was actually no place at all for Zhang in all stages of modern Chinese literature, despite its scope. It was not until the fall of Shanghai that she was granted a chance. . . . The fact that the most splendid days of Zhang Ailing’s literary career lasted merely two years (1943-1945) was predestined. It was one chance in a thousand years, “pass this shop and you won’t find another ahead.” (101).

As early as 1945, Zhang was labeled a cultural traitor and was repeatedly singled out for “treason.”<sup>5</sup> She emigrated to Hong Kong in 1952 and then to the United States in 1955.

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<sup>5</sup> In his 1945 work *A History of the Crimes of Cultural Traitors* 文化汉奸罪恶史 (Wenhua hanjian zui’e shi), Sima Wenzhen writes a chapter on Zhang Ailing called “‘Tailor-of-the Red Gang’ Zhang Ailing: ‘Noble Blood’ under Examination” “红帮裁缝” 张爱玲: “贵族血液”也加检验 (Hongbang caifeng Zhang Ailing: guizu xueye ye jia jianyan). “The red gang” refers to foreigners in the Shanghai dialect, as foreigners were often identified by their different hair colors.

Although she had more than half of her life to live in the States, she wrote few stories and her name, once synonymous with popular fiction, was consigned into oblivion in mainland China until the republications of her work in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, Zhang, Welty, and McCullers all use the character of the Gothic picara as initiated by Radcliffe to explore possibilities of women's escape from the confinement of patriarchal gender roles. The escape from the constriction of femininity as enacted in the American stories entails a break out of enforced alienation either to roam freely outside the carceral society or to attempt to reclaim and remake the heart of society. In contrast, Zhang's female protagonists leave home and travel in hope of keeping away from the trap of traditional, unequal heterosexual/marital relations. Whereas the American writers bring their protagonists' travels to hopeful, albeit inconclusive, endings, Zhang's escape narratives illuminate the limitations of possibilities as much as the possibilities themselves. However, because of her own experience of war, she was keen to the transformative force of war and was able to envision egalitarian relationships between man and woman as an essential part of her picaras' escapes.

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<sup>6</sup> Except for *Fate of Half a Life* 半生缘 (Banshengyuan), adapted from the earlier work *Eighteen Springs* 十八春 (Shiba chun), and several stories written in 1950 but not published until late 1960s and early 1970s, Zhang devoted her time to translating *The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* 海上花列传 (Haishang hua liezhuan) and studying *A Dream of Red Mansions* 红楼梦 (Honglou meng).

## CONCLUSION

This study has endeavored to offer an understanding of Zhang Ailing's *Chuanqi* as part of the global women's effort to establish a voice of their own through refashioning patriarchal literary heritage. To achieve such an objective, I have tackled two related tasks: (1) to demonstrate Zhang's affinity with *and* transformation of the traditional Chinese "Gothic" genre of *chuanqi*, and (2) to illuminate her use of motifs characteristic of Western female Gothic by comparing her works with stories by Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers.

To accomplish the first task, I have entertained comparative perspectives and approached the Chinese marvelous genres of *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* with the Western notion of the Gothic. I have suggested a definition of the Gothic based on its relation to the other and the latter's potential to incite fear and anxiety. Since *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* provide literary stages for the reappearance of the other, they are inevitably underlain by what I call a Gothic premonition. While *zhiguai* tends to let the premonition run wild, *chuanqi* generally hijacks it to induce the opposites of Gothic psychic states—romantic and aesthetic sentiments. I have argued that Zhang's *Chuanqi* explores the same realm of

alterity as traditional *chuanqi* tales—love and feminine sexuality, but unlike *chuanqi*, which selectively represents the feminine “other” to please the male gaze and perpetuate patriarchal views of women, Zhang undermines the aesthetically appealing surface of traditional romances by foregrounding contradictory undercurrents of suffering, ugliness, and chaos.

To achieve the second goal, I have demonstrated Zhang’s deployment of the female grotesque, confinement, and escape in juxtaposition with close readings of representative works by Welty and McCullers. While each motif reveals substantial common ground between Zhang and her American contemporaries, it also provides a point of departure to explore the cultural particularities of Zhang’s and the American writers’ female Gothicisms.

Regarding the trope of the female grotesque, I have argued that cultural particularities notwithstanding, the ideal woman in both the American and Chinese contexts is the selfless, passive custodian of familial and more recently “nationalist” significance. It follows that the female grotesque is none other than the self-seeking and self-ish, one who resists familial/communal and “nationalist” definition, and who asserts herself as a “scandalously” active, independent, and desiring subject. Welty, McCullers, and Zhang have all created such transgressive heroines in their works, and as a rule they are appalling sights. However, while gender transgression in Welty and McCullers’s stories is routinely “embodied” as extra weight and plus size, deviance from patriarchal norms is manifested within a spectrum of bodily ugliness/creepiness in Zhang’s work, not excluding

atrophy. In addition, in Zhang's texts, not only are rule breakers ugly, conformists are equally repugnant.

The second basic motif of female Gothic I have explored is confinement. Textual analysis of representative works by Welty, McCullers, and Zhang demonstrates domestic spaces as a key means through which these writers materialize the power dynamics and psychic forces that define and *entrap* women's existence. However, while spatial imagery in the American stories mainly comprise structures and spaces extraneous to the physical body—including houses, rooms and indoor paraphernalia, Zhang makes extensive use of “small” intimate “bodily” spaces created by women's jewelry and clothing. Furthermore, whereas American writers mainly express a concern with the “cornering” of the increasingly assertive and visible manless women, Zhang, whose imagination was shaped by the social/economic realities of her time, treats primarily the entrapment of women in patriarchal heterosexual/marital relations.

The third leitmotif of female Gothic explored in this study is escape. If the character of the female grotesque and theme of confinement constitute major means of discursive protest against and indictment of patriarchal oppression of women, female Gothicists' preoccupation with movement/escape narrative patterns attests to their—and by extension, all women's—desire for freedom and flight. Again, different routes of escape and varying degrees of success are imagined in the three writers' works. The escape from the constriction of femininity as enacted in the American stories entails a break out of enforced alienation to either roam freely outside the carceral society or to attempt to



reclaim and remake the heart of society. In contrast, Zhang's female protagonists leave the center of their universe—the home—and travel in hope of keeping away from the trap of traditional/unequal heterosexual/marital relations. In addition, whereas the American writers bring their protagonists' travel to an uplifting, albeit inconclusive, ending, Zhang posits that escape is only possible in the most vulnerable moments of patriarchal society.

By putting Zhang on the map of female Gothic literature, the study not only finds an alternative way to appreciate Zhang's literary achievement but also proposes new readings of Welty and McCullers's fictions. It is my hope that my transcontinental reading project has changed the face of female Gothic. Previously understood as a strictly western phenomenon, it can now be seen as a literary movement of global scale and influence.

I have limited this study of Zhang's Gothic imagination to her textual output. It might be interesting to explore how her literary Gothicism was influenced and mirrored by her engagement with the visual arts. As a matter of fact, she frequently designed or chose illustrations for her own stories. A large number of illustrations by Zhang are found in the 1940s editions of *Chuanqi* and the literary magazines she contributed to before 1949. The overwhelming majority of these illustrations are the unflattering portraits of her women characters. Representing their anguish and affliction physically as distorted facial features and/or eerily flattened bodies, these portraits furnish visual evidence for my argument that Zhang consciously uses the female grotesque in her stories as a discursive indictment of patriarchal oppression.

In addition, quite a number of her 1940s essays present rather sophisticated

critiques of Western as well as Chinese paintings. According to these essays, she was well acquainted with the works of Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso.<sup>1</sup> She also comments on quite a few surrealistic paintings, associating “a fresh way of evoking the atmosphere of terror” with the dreamlike irrationality of the art form (“Unforgettable Paintings” 168). While surrealism might have informed her characteristic use of epiphanic hallucination in fiction, fauvism probably inspired her employment of savagely bright and contrastive colors to invoke menacing settings and impersonalized female physiognomy. For instance, nearing the end of “Aloewood Incense: The First Brazier,” Zhang describes a carnivalesque market scene in strokes of dynamic and destabilizing colors: “blue ceramic double-handled flowerpots, rolls and rolls of scallion-green velvet brushed with gold, cellophane bags of Balinese Shrimp Crisps, amber-colored durian cakes from the tropics, Buddha-bead bracelets with their big red tassels, light yellow sachets, little crosses made of dark silver ...” (“Aloewood” 74). The exuberant festivity of the market evokes not so much warmth and pleasure as malevolence and hostility because it underlines Weilong’s fate as a commodity not unlike the dazzling goods on display. What makes the closing scene even more disturbing is the presence of human goods sold side by side with the above mentioned merchandise—prostitutes “standing in the severe light of a gas lamp; the intense chiaroscuro turn[s] their noses light blue and the sides of their faces green, while the rouge that slather[s] over their cheeks look[s] purple” (“Aloewood” 75). Zhang’s

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<sup>1</sup> In “Unforgettable Paintings,” Zhang Ailing gives a rather detailed analysis of Gauguin’s *Nevermore*, in addition to a dozen named and unnamed Western and Asian paintings (163-164). In “On Painting,” she writes, “I had always been aware of Cézanne’s role as a progenitor of modern painting, but I was more interested in the work of later disciples such as Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso, each of whom grasped hold of different aspects of his work and developed them to their logical conclusion” (190). She continues, in the same article, to describe and critique more than thirty paintings of Cézanne.

description readily calls to mind Matisse's violently-colored portraits, especially *Madame Matisse*.

A further comparative study of American and Chinese female Gothicism may engage the native places of the writers as specific locales of gothic imagination. As mentioned before, certain parallels can be drawn between Welty and McCullers's American South and Zhang's China (Shanghai in particular). The most profound is perhaps the fact that both regions were prodded to modernize under conditions of quasi or semi-colonization. Just as the American South was forced to industrialize and urbanize in the postbellum "colonization" by the North, Shanghai became China's treaty port *par excellence* following the catastrophic failure of the Qing government to defend its territorial integrity in the first Opium War. If the new and old milieu of the American South, i.e., its schizophrenic topology and psychology, provides the backdrop against which Welty and McCullers problematize contemporary gender definitions and envision transgressive heroines, a similar cultural ambivalence towards "imposed" modernization coincides with Zhang's interrogations of Confucian strictures on the life of woman. One question I have been contemplating is whether the psychic implications of the fast changing and alienating society are conducive to Gothic imagination in general and female Gothic in particular. To verify this hypothesis and decipher concrete ways in which the uncanny amalgam of traditional and modern, indigenous and foreign, has worked into Zhang, Welty, and McCullers's stories, a further study will probably entail (1) visits to the historic sites related to the writers in Jackson Mississippi, Columbus Georgia, and Shanghai; and (2)

investigations into major archives on the history of these localities in the first half of the twentieth century. Textual and graphic evidence of the unfamiliarizing life and landscape in Shanghai and the new South should be of special interest to such a project.

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